



POST TENEBRAS LUX BOOKS

FICTION BOOKS PREVIEW

READ THE START OF EACH BOOK NOW!

(CLICK ON THE BOOK TITLE TO GO STRAIGHT TO THAT BOOK'S PREVIEW)

Elementary Fairy Tales

[*How to Unmake a Dragon*](#)

[*Faery Wings and Pirate Things*](#)

Medieval Comedic Fantasy for all ages

[*Juvament!: A Mythical Mess*](#)

[*The Mubblefubbles: A Toothy Tangle*](#)

Alternate History/Historical Fiction

[*1. Crescent Tides*](#)

[*2. Fatal Fogs*](#)

Superhero graphic-rich novel

[*The Stalwart Supinator: Servant of the Streets!*](#)

Fantasy Saga

[*Dreaded King Book 1: A Son Rises*](#)

Spy series

[*The Parabaloni \(#1 in the series\)*](#)

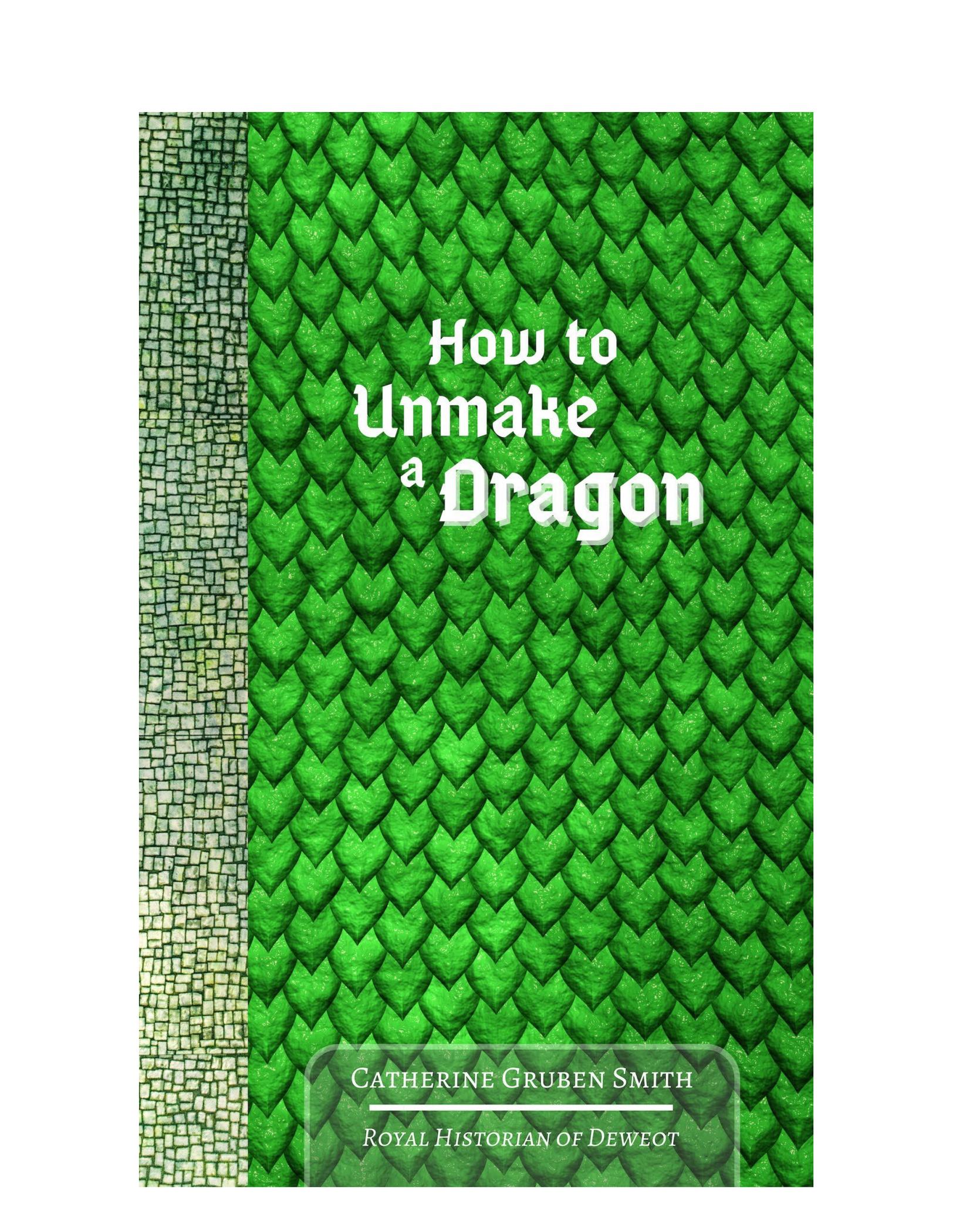
Young Adult Dystopian Sci Fi

[*Sojourners Book 1: Ravens Ruins*](#)

© J. Aaron Gruben, www.nmgrubens.com

Copyright © Catherine Gruben Smith, www.catherinegrubensmith.com

All rights reserved. These books or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. No persons or creatures or animals were irreparably harmed in the writing of these tales.



How to
Unmake
a Dragon

CATHERINE GRUBEN SMITH

ROYAL HISTORIAN OF DEWEOT

How to Unmake A Dragon

The tail slithered back and forth around Prince Burnth, red scales glinting in the summer sunshine. One yellow eye turned to him, the foot-wide pupil tightening to a slit as it focused on Burnth.



“I don’t know...we dragons already have a bad name.” It was an enormous voice, but cool and smooth. “Kulinyarn’s king has been working very hard to change our image from the rampaging monster to something more humane.”

“This is a job of protection.” The Prince’s tone oozed reassurance. “This king needs thrown off his throne, he is a tyrant! You would be the dragon liberator.”

“We haven’t been out of our own kingdom for a hundred years,” the dragon rumbled.

“But dragons have been seen all over the countryside,” Burnth almost cooed.

“Faery-made creatures,” the dragon scoffed, his voice dropping to a growl that shook Burnth’s insides. “Weak, tiny, scrabbling things that go back to what they were before after a day!” The tail snapped, the crack of it rolling over the hills. Burnth felt the earth shake under his boots as the dragon’s clawed feet slammed into the grass, pushing off. The beast reared, his wings unfurling with a burst of wind, covering sixty feet of blue sky. Red scales glowed orange as the sun shone through the membranous material stretching between the wings’ bone structures. “No one outside Kulinyarn has seen a real dragon!” he roared. The hills gathered the sound and spit it back at Burnth in a roaring echo. The dragon’s back arched, bony plates clacking together and wings furling, as he dropped to the earth again, watching as the ground shook out from under Burnth’s feet.

“Promise me,” the dragon hissed, his forked tongue flicking Burnth’s feathered hat off the prince’s head, “your scheme will work.”

Burnth pushed himself back to his feet. He spit out a mouthful of grass and ran a starched handkerchief over his perfect face. The prince flashed a smile, white teeth glinting in the sun, as he tucked the hankie back in his pocket.

“It will work. I have the faery union’s assurance that the first part of my plan is already in play. Come with me, and be a dragon that throws down tyrants!”

Red-scaled eyelids slid over the huge eyes and back up again in a long blink, with a sound like a giant slug being slowly pulled off a window pane.

“The union, yes... That’s another thing,” the dragon rumbled. The words were hesitant, the expression almost fearful; Burnth could see it was the real thing holding the dragon back, and he smiled again. “Anyone who tangles with Deweot is likely to become something other than what he is. The land is crawling with faeries, waiting to practice their art.”



“Ah, but I have a way of dealing with faeries,” Burnth said, his voice dancing with a sly delight. “Never you fret, when we are ready to move I will have them too busy with their own affairs to bother with us. Very good, that’s settled!” Prince Burnth leapt on his horse, a gleaming, powerful gray, wheeling him in an unnecessary arch and brandishing his feathered hat at the dragon. “I will find you next week in Deweot!” The stallion gave a loud whinny and thundered away over the hills. The dragon watched him disappear. A huge sigh scorched a hole in the hill across from him.

“Dethroning a tyrant, perhaps. But will the one taking the man’s place be an improvement?”

Chapter One: Finkle the Faery

“The club restaurant isn’t what it used to be,” Currant sighed. Her thin legs kicked against the toad-stool. An annoyed croak came from the toad. Durgum nodded, his gossamer wings dancing as he swallowed the last of the potatoes and reached for the cake. “I recall before the union days, a few hundred years ago, remember Durgum?” The fat faery nodded, licking the cake spoon. “Cheese dripping off everything, and mushrooms in every dish! Those were the days.” Durgum’s toad grunted as the faery slumped, eyeing the mess of empty dishes splayed over the white table.

“Better not let the union leaders hear you talking like that, Currant. They might revoke your faery license.” Durgum’s toad-stool shifted under him, annoyed at the weight. “At least the seats are well trained.”

“Yes,” Currant frowned. “Everything neat and trained and well ordered.” The two faeries paused as a herd of miniature cows thundered through the hall, their excited bellowing striking off the cave walls, chocolate dripping from their coats as their long pink tongues slobbered over their faces, dragging melted chocolate into slobbering mouths. Two young faeries rushed after the herd shouting and waving at them to come back. The thunder of and happy moos and faery shouts turned into a tunnel, slowly melting into the steady hum of the firefly lamps. A long, slow sigh came from Currant. “You could see real sights here in the old days. Nothing ever happens in the club now.”



“Too many regulations,” Durgum nodded. Currant kicked her feet idly. Her toad-stool slapped his flat feet into the stone and hopped off, Currant’s shimmering pink dress rustling around her as she shouted at it. Durgum’s toad croaked, jerked its head into its bulbous body, and back peddled furiously. Durgum tumbled off, his back slamming into the stone floor. He lay and blinked at the fireflies shifting in the lamps and gave a little cough. Something exploded in tunnel fourteen. A sigh slid from Durgum and he climbed to his feet, brushing cake crumbs off his green waistcoat. An anonymous someone had sent him a voucher to the club restaurant for today, and it had been worth

the trip to use it. But the club was a glum place since the union. Six faeries in white lab coats and goggles came coughing and running from tunnel fourteen, just in front of a billowing cloud of green gas that smelled of lime and coconuts. It was time to get back to his tree. The ivy needed bushing up in the old forest, and some of the mushrooms had been arguing with him over how big they could grow. Work, work, work.

Durgum spun toward tunnel number one as the nearest exit for the surface and trotted for it, his belly jiggling with every step. The leaders had specified only their invited guests could enter tunnel one. Durgum was never invited anywhere by someone “important.” He was too merry, too fat, and too mischievous. He chuckled as he trotted onto the magenta shag carpet of the tunnel. This is what he had sunk to for fun; going places he wasn’t specified to be. The gray rocks of the tunnel shimmered with precious gems and sparkling geodes, some of them challenging the rug for brightness. Durgum spun two corners, and a walking song began to hum from him. But his hum was interrupted as words rang around the hallway. It was a young, female voice, and she was angry. Durgum’s feet slowed and he stopped, rocking on the heels of his pointed shoes, and listening.

“I don’t care what the code says, just give me my part!”

“I wouldn’t try demanding things, Finkle. What are you doing here, anyway?” Whiny, wheedling, it was Pucksners’ voice, and Durgum’s button nose wrinkled. He didn’t like the union leaders. Any of them, but Pucksners annoyed him most. His nose wrinkled harder, and one eye closed. A soft poof, a scent of pipe tobacco and rich black dirt, and Durgum went invisible. He slid up the corridor, keeping to the side of the tunnel, where the shag rug wouldn’t show his footprints as clearly. A bright white light spilled onto the cave walls from a dog-shaped door. Durgum stood on tiptoes and rested his double chin on the snout of the dog, staring in.

All the union leaders lounged in the sumptuous room. In their fine clothes, their gossamer wings dusted with glitter, all staring down their noses at a single young faery beating her wings in anger in the center of the room. A simple brown dress draped over her and red curls tumbled down her back. They would have been prettier if they were her own, and not hanging from a collar around her neck.

“I’ve done what you asked. You promised me twelve xertron caps,” she almost shouted. Durgum’s jaw would have dropped if his head wasn’t resting on it. Xertrons were the rarest and most coveted mushroom, the dishes you could make with a xertron, it was... legendary.

“You still haven’t passed the girl on to who we ordered,” Pucksners whined. “It shouldn’t be a problem, the princess has always been under her father’s thumb and hasn’t even left her kingdom. One smile flashed from him, and she will swoon into his arms. We will have your xertrons after you fulfill your bargain. A few days after that. Don’t come back before.” Noses wrinkled, eyes winked, and ears wriggled. Soft poofs filled the room, a myriad of spicy scents mingled and swirled out into the hall, and the leaders winked off. The young faery grumbled and griped and began to stomp down the halls, choosing a less ostentatious exit.

She didn’t notice the line of footprints following her.



Cottages and villagers flashed by, blurring together as the wind whipped his hair into his face and tore at his clothes. Henry desperately leaned over his horse's neck, whispering Dexterous on. The runaway cart was just a few yards ahead of them. He could see the little boy on the wagon seat, clapping his hands and screaming in joy at the speed. Dexterous flattened his ears and Henry felt the breath sucked into the horse's mighty lungs as he strained for more speed. The thunder of his stallion's hooves on the cobblestones vied with the tearing wind as it screamed in the young man's ears.



A sharp crack of wood drifted back to him and he blew his hair out of his eyes, trying to see the wagon again. Its two back wheels spun on the air as it vaulted off the cobblestones. A crunch of wood, and it landed on the grassy hill, picking up speed as it rolled down toward the great pines and hardwoods of the old forest. The trees rose in a tight line a quarter mile from Henry, thick and ancient, blocking out the sunlight and rising into the air to cut off even the blue sky. Dexterous spun on one leg, and in an instant his gate shifted. The sharp cobbles changed for soft grass and the horse flew down the green slope, cutting toward the wagon at a sharp angle. Henry kicked his feet free from the stirrups, drew his legs up till he crouched on his horse's back, and stared at the wagon. His pulse pounded in his ears and adrenaline roared through him, as his brain raced, calculating distances, angles, thrust, speed.

Henry's hands and feet pushed off the leather saddle and he launched into the air. Wood dug into his hands as he landed heavily on the wagon, his boots scrabbling to gain a footing. The boy turned to look at him. His tongue stuck out. Henry's eyes flicked to the trees. A vast ancient oak loomed over them. His hands tightened on the wooden wagon and he jerked himself forward. One arm scooped up the little boy as the other grabbed the infant sleeping fitfully next to her brother.

"Jump, Sire!" Dexterous roared at him, the hoarse whinny in his voice strong in fear for his master. Henry jumped. He didn't look to see where he would land, he didn't even have the chance to get a good footing. He just pushed himself off the wagon's wood, clutching the children to his chest. Green, cool grass slammed into his shoulder, and his right ribs crunched at the impact, his breath leaving in a whoosh. The wagon rammed into the oak, the whole front of it disintegrating in a shower of splinters. Both children started screaming.

Henry lay staring up at the oak leaves rustling in a breeze, trying to get a breath back into his winded lungs. His ears rang with the mighty wail of the boy and baby. Other voices started to invade the screams. The boy's teeth sank into his shoulder and Henry rolled to his left side, a gasping roar slipping from him. A gaggle of villagers trotted down the green hill towards them, a chubby farmwife leading the pack by yards. The boy scrambled out of Henry's arms and toddled toward the farmwife at a run, still screaming. She caught him up, her voice breathless and scolding and comforting all at once as she raced for Henry. He had made it to his knees by the time she was there, and he handed

her the baby. As the other villagers came up, Henry was on his feet and breathing again, leaning against Dexterous as the stallion nuzzled his mousey hair. The farmwife plunked the sniffing boy on the ground and was scolding him hard for unlatching the harness traces and throwing pebbles at the horses, as she moved toward the remains of her wagon. The rest of the villagers clustered around Henry.

“Two saved in one day, not bad for a young one!” someone shouted, and a babble of voices agreed.

“He even managed it without breaking anything significant,” another someone yelled.

“Surely you don’t mean the neck of Niggle’s boy!” someone called, and the crowd roared with laughter. Henry smiled at them, but it was a weak one. There was nothing funny about a boy’s neck being broken, even if he was a little monster. One hulking man in a blacksmith’s apron stepped forward, towering over Henry. A sausage like finger jabbed curiously into his chest.

“Don’t be so quiet, boy,” the blacksmith rumbled. “Aren’t you supposed to do a little boasting, to tell us who did such a feat and embellish it prettily to be entered into the *Annals of Honor*?”

“Yes, it was six children, wasn’t it?” someone called.

“And the tree came to meet you, swinging its branch like a club!” someone else suggested.

“Just two,” Henry murmured. “Truth is more important than a good story.” Several eyebrows rose among the crowd.

“That’s true enough,” the blacksmith said, his head tipping as he studied the grass-stained young knight. “But you knight errants don’t usually mind a little embellishing. Come, your name! Have the bards told us about you yet, or are we your first stop?”

“Er, well, I, um, should be going, must seek out more wrongs to right and all that,” Henry fumbled, turning to get one foot in the stirrup.

“All kneel for your prince, Henrextille of the house of Mung, High Prince of Deweot!” Dexterous shouted.

“No, don’t,” Henry quickly said, one hand slapping his horse’s neck irritably as a few in the crowd moved to obey. “I really would rather you not.”

“Good heavens, nineteen already?” an old woman at the back of the crowd commented. “Time does fly, he’s already been sent out to gain a name and meet his people. It is him, you can see the Mung in him with those big ears.”

“And the broken nose his brother gave him,” her shriveled old husband nodded, and raised his voice to call to the prince. “How long have you been out erranting, Sire?”

“Four months,” Henry sighed. He straightened his shoulders and tried flashing a smile at the crowd. His smiles didn’t flash. They crept over his freckled face and stared out at people shyly. “Tell me, what does Deweot need the most?”

“Lower taxes!” every voice shouted back at him. Henry nodded sagely. That’s what every person had told him every time he asked. His father had warned him about the tax problem. Deweot had the lowest taxes of any kingdom for five thousand miles, but no one likes to pay taxes. In Henry’s estimation, if that’s all the people had to complain of, things were going well. He nodded a few more times, then scrambled onto Dexterous and turned him to the only space without people crowding around him; facing the old forest. He paused though before setting his spurs to the white stallion’s powerful sides, and turned back to the crowd.

“I say, has any of you heard of a... well, a maiden in need of rescuing?” he asked. A few knowing grins showed in the crowd, and a fine blush began to creep over the prince.

“What did he ask?” the old man at the back of the crowd demanded of his wife.

“He’s looking for a maiden to rescue, so he has someone to marry, so he can go back home again!” she shouted into his ear. The old man made an “Oh,” with his shriveled lips and nodded. The blacksmith stepped up next to Henry’s knee, one enormous hand pointing past the oak.

“My boy told me about one. Through there, turn left at the ash, half a mile, then go right at the stream with the two willows. May the Creator’s goodness go with you,” the man said, and slapped Dexterous good naturedly on the flank to get him moving. The horse’s long neck swiveled and he glared at the big man. Henry urged him forward and the stallion sprang away, trotting under the huge oak.

Damp, leaf-scented darkness closed over them. Dexterous’ trotting hooves squished against the deadfall of hundreds of years of leaves, gnarled limbs twisting over their heads. What sunlight that made it through was tinted green. The sounds of the villagers disappeared to nothing. Wood creaked and groaned, leaves rustled, and one bird called to another high overhead. A squirrel chattered somewhere to their left.

“Do you have to announce me everywhere we go?” Henry broke the silence.

“You are supposed to be meeting your people and letting them see who is going to be the next ruler when the king retires,” the horse said, tossing his head. “How can they get to know you if you stumble over your name every time and let them think you’re only another knight errant?”

“All right, all right,” Henry grumbled, ducking under a bowed oak limb as it snaked over their trail. “But you don’t have to be so...royal about it.” The soft lips of the horse twitched and his black eyes twinkled. But his family had served the Mungs for generations. He knew to value the humble spirit, not condemn it. The soft, living sounds of the forest closed around them again and Dexterous trotted on. An enormous ash rose in front of them, its off-white trunk standing out in the green light. The stallion turned right and kept trotting. Henry sat still and gnawed his lip, staring at the tips of Dexterous’ ears. This would be the seventh maiden he had rescued since he left the royal castle. Maidens were always getting snapped up by trolls and faeries and fawns, to hold for adventuring knights and get a good story. It wasn’t difficult to find a maiden. The difficulty was finding a decent one. Five hadn’t thought much of him with his large ears, stocky shortness, and broken nose. The other two had been less than ideal as queen material, one shouting and snappish, the other prattling

on about her own beauty for hours. Henry squared his shoulders and forced his head up and back straight. Maybe this one would be different.



A pile of musty books tipped and Adele squeaked as she slammed her hands into them, trying to push the volumes back up. She sidled around the book tower, inched past a wash basin, stepped over a tiger cub rolling with a bone, bumped a painting of a raven's eye, and sighed. Finkle's house was four stories tall and forty feet by four feet. It was hard for Adele to move. But the round window gleamed at her at the end of this story, and she pressed on; pressed against the left wall, that is, hoping the tiger's mother wasn't due to arrive soon. You never knew what to expect in a faery's house.

Green sunlight filtered through the old panes, and cool, earth-scented air blew over Adele as she pushed the window open. She leaned on the sill and breathed deep, watching the leaves blow and the movement of the old forest. She would have liked to slip her head and shoulders out. But until a rescuer came for her, the dratted faery's fence held true. If she tried to slip out a window or door, she rammed into a clear wall. Her nose still ached from trying yesterday. It was part of the security system of the house; when Finkle was out, no one left, and no one passing by could see the towering, thin building in the oak forest. Adele just stood and breathed, reminding herself it had only been three days. Dratted faeries, out looking for fun. Why did they always grab princesses?

The soft clop of hooves sped over the wind, and Adele stood on tiptoes, craning her neck as her ruby lips parted, trying to see who it was. Maybe this time she would call to him, and get out of this tiny house!

A gray stallion, groomed to gleaming perfection and covered in intricate red trappings, cantered past. Adele slumped back. She had seen that impossibly handsome prince go by earlier this morning. His black hair flowed behind him, and even from here she could see his smile gleamed. But she had also seen his temper flare against his mount, when the poor horse had tripped in a mole's home. It had been brief, but violent. That was not the sort of man she was looking for. The other knights she had watched ride past her window were equally inadequate. Adele had spent a good deal of time around her family's castle. It had given her the opportunity to learn much and observe life deeply, more deeply than the gad-about always rushing from one thing to another. She knew what sort of a man she didn't want. Not one with a violent temper. Or one of the six other knights she had watched ride past, noses in the air, complaining bitterly of slighted pride because their lying stories hadn't been elevated as much as they wanted. Adele sighed and dropped her chin on her hands, staring out the window.

The impossibly handsome one pulled his mount up sharply, the horse's haunches bunching and leaves spraying epically as he obeyed the order. A powerful bay horse trotted into the clearing. Adele blinked and straightened, studying the newcomer. He wasn't handsome. But he was grass-stained, his sword handle just a little tarnished from sweaty palms, and his head turning from side to side as he rode. A man who was willing to get dirty to get his work done, and (at least currently) was

thinking more about the world around him than himself. His horse pulled to a stop, giving a snort, and the two knights faced each other.

“Henrextile, as I live and breathe!” the impossibly handsome one almost bellowed.

“Good afternoon, Prince Burnth,” Henry said, his tone was reserved.

“I haven’t seen you since the ball in Vree, when your brother let the hounds loose! I thought the duchess was never going to get up again after the two wolfdogs sent her sprawling,” Burnth chuckled. “I hope you will forgive us all for laughing as the duke collared you two and flung you down the steps.”

“Tug means well,” Henry shrugged. “He was trying to get a thorn out of a puppy’s paw. Unfortunately, he was lied to by a conniving cat who wanted to see the hounds in trouble and saw to it the latch didn’t click home.”

“If you hadn’t defended him, you wouldn’t have been disgraced in front of the dignitaries of the world,” Burnth said. Henry’s spine straightened, his head lifting.

“I would have considered myself disgraced if I did not try to help my brother mend a wrong.” The knight’s voice snapped. But he didn’t reach for his sword even though his fingers twitched. Four stories above him, a pair of ruby red lips tilted into a smile.

“Yes, well, if I had a bumbling brother like yours, I wouldn’t be found in his company,” Burnth commented, flicking the reins in his hand. His gray stallion leapt to the side, prancing past the bay. “I am looking for something that I was told is on the edge of this forest. Am I anywhere near the place?”

“We just came from the edge,” Henry quickly supplied, pointing helpfully. The gray horse thundered off, the prince’s raven hair billowing out behind him, catching in his red cape as it flowed in the breeze. Henry gave a little shake, as if an annoying beetle had flitted off him, and urged Dexterous forward. He sniffed the air curiously. Was that pipe smoke? And old dirt? How was it he just now smelled it? Dexterous’s ears flicked toward a hedgehog, wondering if he had actually heard that fruity chuckle. He was almost certain they had already traveled the half-a-mile the blacksmith had stipulated. But there was nothing here except a clearing covered in leaves.

Adele watched Henry ride past, noting his horse didn’t even have a bit and yet went exactly where he told it. She gave a decisive nod, pushed the window open a little farther, and drew in a good breath.

“Help!” shrieked Adele. Henry started so hard he almost fell off his horse. But in the same heartbeat he wheeled Dexterous, his sword springing into his hand as the horse leapt forward. Dexterous slammed face first into the four-foot wide wall and staggered back, his eyes crossed. His legs splayed as he tried to get his balance back. Henry kicked himself free of the stirrups and dropped to the ground, his sword held in a number one defensive position, just behind his right shoulder, ready to swing down into anything. His teeth gritted as he held back a groan, his joints popping and muscles cringing; this had been an eventful morning. A crash came from somewhere high above him. He blinked at the empty air. A small feline growled and hissed somewhere up there. A young

woman's voice said something, apologizing he thought. Another crash came, broken glass tinkling merrily, and the voice gave a squeak. A series of sharp, rhythmic thumps sounded from the empty air just above the prince, spiraling quickly downward toward the forest floor, as the voice squeaked and yelped with each bump. Henry's sword lowered and he glanced at Dexterous. The horse was sneezing too hard to notice, trying to get himself back in order. A louder crash rang, wood and glass all scrunching together, and the voice groaned just in front of him.

A peaked door jerked open in front of his face, and Henry fell back a step, the sword tip dropping to the forest floor. A tall, willowy young lady stood framed in a doorway, black hair flowing down over the shoulders of her forest-tinted tunic, one hand rubbing her long white neck as she squinted. A steep circular stair stood at her right elbow. A broken shelf at her left elbow settled with a crack, dropping a statuette of a hog onto a rubble of glass and wood.

"Ow," Adele groaned.

"Um, hello," Henry murmured. "Was it you shouting just now?"

"Yes. Then I fell down stairs. Can you come in?" She stepped back, limping on one leg. Henry stepped forward, turning sideways to get his shoulders through the skinny door. Adele almost beamed at him. Only a real rescuer, out to help and not just help himself, could have walked through the faery's security system.

"Do you agree with the Lesser Kulthin's doctrines, as laid on in his pamphlet *How We Live Matters?*?" Adele asked breathlessly. Henry blinked at her.

"Kulthin...Well, um, yes, I do," he stammered. A gleam was beginning to spark in his brown eyes. This girl knew her church theories. Adele beamed at him.

"What's your opinion on the effects of cane sugar on children's teeth?" she demanded.

"I have no idea," Henry blinked.

"That's all right, I was wondering about this though," Adele said, and fired off another question. And another. Henry stumbled out answers, watching her beautiful face start to shine, and wondering what he had stumbled into, and hoping he could bring it home. He finally broke into her description of a philosopher he had never heard of, which had melded into a question about fried eggs.

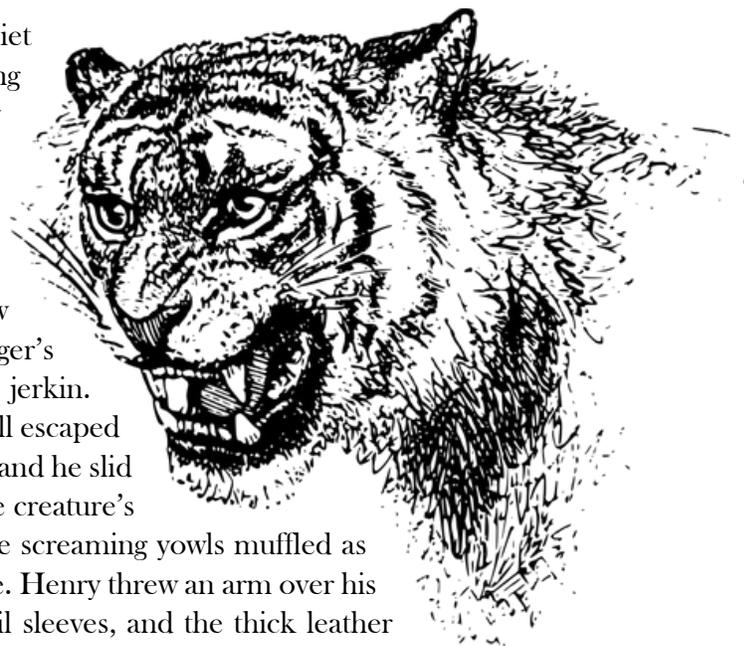
"I say, were you shouting for help a few moments ago?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm being held by a nasty little faery," Adele said, her pert nose wrinkling in distaste. She leaned a little closer and whispered confidentially. "She can't even make a proper pot of tea!"

"Good heavens, that is dreadful," Henry said. He swallowed. "Would you, uh, I'm out erranting at the moment, but I usually live at the Deweot castle you see, as I'm the high prince there, and Father sent me out to...well, among other things to rescue a maiden for a wife." His freckled face was beat red, the tips of his big ears almost glowing with the color. "I know we just met, but would you be interested in letting me rescue you, and seeing where we go from there?"

“I would be delighted,” Adele smiled. Though it wasn’t a very eloquent invitation. Henry’s smile crept over him, his brown eyes dancing.

A sharp horse’s war bellow shattered the quiet outside. Henry whipped around, his sword gashing a line in the wall as he jerked it up. A huge body of orange and black fur slammed into him, furious yowling growls ringing through the house. Henry’s breath left him for the second time in the day as two great paws hit his chest. His sword clattered to the ground as he flew backward down the length of the house, the tiger’s paws scrabbling to get past his thick leather jerkin. Yellowed teeth aimed for his face and a hoarse yell escaped him. A hardwood dresser smashed into his spine and he slid gasping to the floor, desperately jerking under the creature’s belly. Teeth sank into the dresser drawer and the screaming yowls muffled as the great cat thrashed, trying to get her mouth free. Henry threw an arm over his face, the terrible claws raking over his chain-mail sleeves, and the thick leather over his torso. The smell and heat of the thing overwhelmed him as he fought for enough room to reach the dagger in his belt. A back claw stuck in his chain mail over his elbow. Metal twisted, and sprang away, and a sharp pain lanced through his arm. But the cat pulled her leg back, trying to get unstuck from the metal. Henry kicked his boots into the floor, using the pull of the animal to jerk out from under it.



Green sunlight and air spilled over him and Henry gasped, pulling it into his lungs. His scrabbling hand wrapped around orange fur and he used it to jerk himself to his feet. A furious yowl roared from the cat. Its fangs snapped out of the drawer. Yellow eyes fastened onto Henry’s brown ones. His hand closed around his dagger and jerked it out, his mind rushing on to diagrams in his hunting books at home, desperately trying to come up with a plan.

“Tigers leaping out of nowhere,” Henry muttered, shifting his grasp as the huge cat writhed around to face him in the small hallway. “No room to even turn around. Beautiful maidens screaming out of thin air. Definitely a faery’s house.”

“Where is he,” the tiger snarled. Her tail lashed like a living snake, and Henry could see the muscles bunching and twitching under her skin as she poised to leap.

“He who?” he asked, his voice tight. “We can find him, I’m sure we can work this out if we just—”

Claws clacked on the hardwood floor and another yowl ripped from the tiger as she leapt. Henry flung himself forward, landing in a hard roll. His neck popped, and his bruised back cringed. But as he sprung to his feet and pivoted, the tiger was in front of him again, trying to twist to face him, and furious. He could see his sword lying just a few yards ahead of him, and the open door with the wonderful fresh green light spilling in... but there was a writhing tiger in between him and it,

and a lady who needed protecting. Henry swallowed and shifted his grip on the dagger again, looking around the hallway desperately. He wouldn't get away with the same trick twice. The tiger's muscles bunched, a snarl rippling over her face.

A cast-iron pan sailed from the stairway and clanged into the tiger's skull. The cat's legs buckled, just for an instant, her big feline eyes blinking. Her knees straightened and the snarl turned livid as the tiger twisted for the stairs. Adele stood on the last step, glaring at the beast.

"Leave him alone!" she shouted. "I have—"

A livid shriek of rage lifted from the cat and she pounced for the stairs. A yell burst from Henry and he leapt for the tiger. Coarse fur and hard muscles collided with him as Henry threw himself flat on the animal's back, two arms snaking around the cat's neck and jerking her bodily away from Adele. He could feel the growls strangling in her throat. The cat thrashed, ramming furniture, knocking pictures off the wall. A painting of a pink duck bounced off Henry's skull, then clattered to the ground, glass shattering. He tightened his hold, his face buried into the creature's smelly head. Her front paws lashed up, raking over Henry's shoulders. Pain lanced over his neck as claws raked over the skin.

"Stop, here he is!" Adele's voice was breathless and fast, just held back from being a shriek. Something mewed. The thrashing stopped. A breath wheezed through the cat. Two panting, pounding heartbeats, and the cat stayed still. Henry slowly released his stranglehold and sat up. Adele stood on the lowest step. A tiger cub dangled from her outstretched hands. It mewed again. The tiger under Henry leapt forward, and he tumbled off backward, his boots crunching on glass. The tiger swept up the kitten, murmuring to it as it mewed and squirmed and chewed at her nose.

"My house!" It was a wail from the doorway. Henry looked up to see a four foot faery glaring at them. Her violet eyes flashed with red flecks, and the collar of red curls trembled as she shook with rage. The tiger snarled, a deep sound of hatred dragged up from her belly.

"It would serve you right if she ate you," Adele snapped at the faery. Red flecked eyes turned to the princess. Henry swallowed. Deweot was a faery hub. He knew more about them than this tall young woman it seemed. He quickly sidled around the snarling tiger, offering a bow that almost scraped the ground.

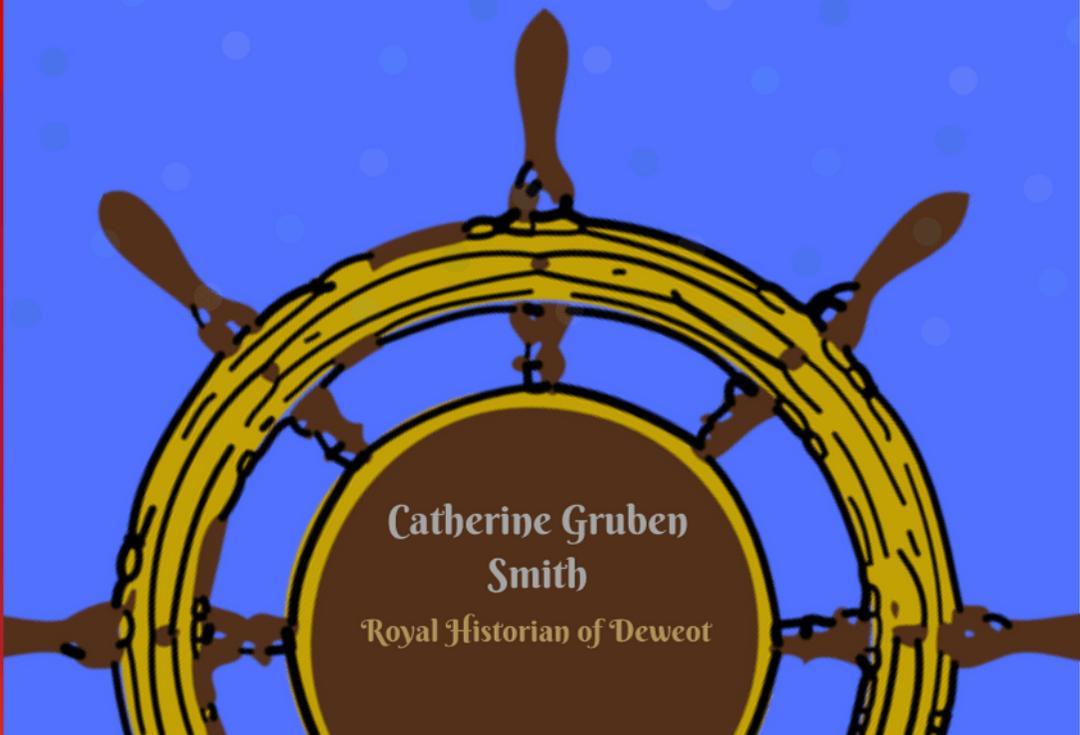
"I don't think I would eat her if I were you. Tigers are notoriously stringy," Henry said to the faery, twisting Adele's words. He muttered out the side of his mouth to the tiger as he squeezed around her. "Perhaps it would be best if you gathered your young and left." The cat snatched up her cub and leapt out the door, bounding past the faery and disappearing into the woods. Henry leaned down, picked up his sword, and slid it into its simple leather sheath; every movement slow and deliberate. "I am Prince Henrexile, of the house of Mung," he said, his voice as soothing and cheerful as he could make it. Those eyes were still flecking red. And she hadn't said anything. Which was a very, very bad sign. "Your houseguest has agreed to leave your care in my company. Thank you for your hospitality, and the adventure."

"Not with you!" the faery hissed.

“I will leave with whom I please,” Adele said, her chin lifting. She marched past the faery into the clearing. “Your own laws state that if I choose to be rescued by a rescuer, I am free.” Henry swallowed again. That was true. But he also knew their laws said nothing about the rescuer leaving, and that there were many ways leaving freely could become an unhappy state; a personal rain cloud always drizzling over your head, life as a newt, or perhaps a state of unrecognizability. He slid his dagger into his belt and sidled out past the faery, nodding at her as he tried not to run for Dexterous. For an instant he thought he saw her hand move as he slid past, and was that glitter around his boots? But then he was through, out into the clearing, leaping onto Dexterous and pulling Adele up behind him. The horse charged off, and the deeper dimness of the close old forest closed over their heads. A long, slow breath blew out of Henry. He let himself slump on his horse. Adele said nothing as she perched comfortably behind the prince. But her eyes kept turning to the four long scratches on his neck, dripping blood down his ripped jerkin, and her mind kept playing over the split second of terror as her world filled with tiger teeth and claws and fur; then Henry, leaping on it and pulling it back.



Faery Wings *and* Pirate Things



Catherine Gruben
Smith

Royal Historian of Deweot

Faery Wings and Pirate Things

High Prince Henrextil Mung rubbed his forehead, but the headache kept growing. Afternoon sunlight streamed into the throne room and sparkled over the delegation of faeries. Glitter fell from Durgum's fat belly as he chuckled at Henry's confusion. A tall young man stood beside the faery. His sea boots shifted uncomfortably, and his black wide-brimmed hat spun in his hands till it was a wonder the knife in the brim stayed in place.

"Tell me again," Prince Henry said slowly. "You want this gentleman appointed Chief Admiral of the Deweot Royal Navy?"

"That's right," Durgum beamed. "With sole power to organize the Royal Navy as he sees fit."

"You do realize, I suppose, that Deweot is a landlocked country?" Henry said helplessly. ("Landlocked," dear reader, is a sensible name grownups use when they mean "country-not-by-the-seaside-where-I-like-to-build-sand-castles." It is a kingdom locked in by land.) "I mean, we have the river, and a lake or two I suppose..."

"Oh, that's all right, we're taking care of that," one of the faeries piped up, and Henry went cold. Why, oh why, did his father choose this morning to leave on vacation! "*It will do you good,*" Mickle Mung had said, slapping his eldest on the shoulder, "*get you used to the job of king.*" And now he was stuck with this. Faeries never came asking the king for things. Something was behind this.

"How exactly are you taking care of it?" Henry asked.

"Just a tunnel a few hundred miles long, nothing to fret over," Durgum said quickly, and rushed the conversation on. "Look, you owe me a favor."

"Excuse me, but I've already granted you enough land to grow a thousand mushrooms, exclusive rights to two different farmsteads' dairy, and I might add, after that Higgleston affair, your life."

Henry's tone was not friendly.

"How was I to know that wall was going to cave in," Durgum grumbled, but another faerie dug him in the ribs. Henry rubbed his forehead again as he went on.

"I think the account you racked up from the dragon business is more than settled, Durgum of the Old Forest. Now, why do you want a navy?"

"Spices."

The word was soft, in an accent acquired by sailors, and came from the man towering amidst the three-foot faeries. There was nothing eye-catching about his simple breeches or the seal leather vest pulled over his old shirt. But something in the way his eyes glittered from under his curly black hair kept drawing Henry's attention even away from the faeries. His single word now explained the whole situation; faeries are obsessive about their cooking. They would move heaven and earth for a way to get spices from the islands. It seems they had been moving earth, a lot of it. Henry sat back, considering hard. But his eyes stayed on the young man. The hat spun faster in the sailor's hands.

"Listen Durgum," the acting king said, sitting up straight on the throne (a cushy affair, and not at all the uncomfortable straight-backed thing one would expect of a throne). "I have one main objection to this plan of yours. I don't mind having the rest of the world laughing at a landlocked country forming a navy, or even the expense of building boats—"



“Ships,” the young man corrected automatically, then looked down and mumbled an apology under his breath. Henry pretended he didn’t notice.

“My main objection is standing beside you. Why this gentleman? Honestly, I hesitate to call him that, even here we’ve heard the stories. Durgum, Captain Grovyer is a pirate!”

“No, I’m not, really!” the young man said desperately. The hat began to lose its form. “Well, I was for a bit, sort of. The seizing of the Khromatic Kate, now that might be piracy, or when I took Pinlaz Gate, but I didn’t keep—”

“How do you think I came across him?” Durgum butted in, beaming. “The best man at the job is the one who can remove the competition. Where are the big pirates now, eh Henry?”

“Besides, he’s an honorary faerie, from an old family matter,” another faery interrupted. “A faery can’t be a pirate, can they?”

“There was that fella’ Gonthalon back in ’67,” one faery drawled, and flicked a languid finger at the sailor. “And now we have him to add to the annals.”

“You’re not helping,” Captain Grovyer growled at the faeries.

“Oh, honestly.”

The new voice burst from the back of the throne room, amongst the crowd watching the fun as the king worked. A portly young woman pushed her way to the front, red hair spilling from a braid and curling around her face. (“Portly,” dear reader, is a polite way to say she was not skinny; portly lies somewhere between chunky and fat.) She bounced around the guards set to keep the people in order, as they stood and blinked at her. The young lady strode forward and Henry noticed with amusement even the faeries moved aside at the look on her face.

“You don’t have much going today, Sire,” the woman stated, stopping beside Captain Grovyer. Her hand slid naturally into his. “I’ve been listening to the crowd and the worst of it is a stolen cow who’s already wandered back home. So you just sit there with your lady,” (she bobbed a curtsy to Adele, as the acting-queen sat knitting, her belly as round as the child inside promised to be), “maybe order in a good tray of tea, and let us tell you a story. When you hear the whole tale, you’ll understand why Matt is a pirate, but still isn’t a pirate, not really.”

“It’s a bit long, don’t you think, Kate?” Captain Grovyer muttered, but Kate spun on him.

“How else is this muddle going to get sorted out? Matt, we’re not going to start our family with this nice young fellow thinking you’re a pirate, when we know better! Besides, it’s a good story.” She folded her hands, took a breath, and started to tell the tale of Captain Mattrinka Grovyer the Polyhued.

Chapter 1: Pelicans, Dinners, and Axes

Fifteen Months Before Henry’s Throne Room...

A yelp spilled from Mattrinka Grovyer as his foot slammed into the sand, pushing him into a leap, and just missing the teeth snapping at the back of his trousers. Sea foam splashed up behind him as the crocodile landed hard. Matt’s boots pounded through the surf and dug into the soft sand of the beach. It was bad stuff for running on, but he could hear the crocodile behind him, and terror is good for speed. Matt held two pelican chicks pressed to his chest, flapping and peeping in fright. A throaty roar broke from the crocodile. Matt spotted a tree branch, waving over a villa’s walled garden, and ran for it. The crocodile lunged, snapping furiously. Another yelp broke from Matt as he leapt for the tree. One hand caught the branch and he swung himself up, his legs

locking around it and the pelican chicks beating against him and cawing. He hung there panting, sea water dripping from his clothes, the branch swaying in the breeze. The crocodile writhed on the beach below him, snapping his jaws in a fury.

“Oy, beastie, get away!” Matt shouted at him. The thin snout opened, white teeth gleaming, and his throaty, screeching roar rang over the beach. A huff came from the reptile. He turned and waddled back into the surf, thrashed his four foot tail, and disappeared into the ocean. Matt sagged, a relieved sigh flying from him. He gave a quick swing and straddled the branch, his legs dangling in the bright sunshine. Gently, he brought his hand down from his chest. The two white chicks sprawled in his arms, gangly and clumsy, their bills ludicrously large, and their hearts beating so hard he could see the thumping on their chest. “It’s all right young ones. Uncle Matt has you safe.”

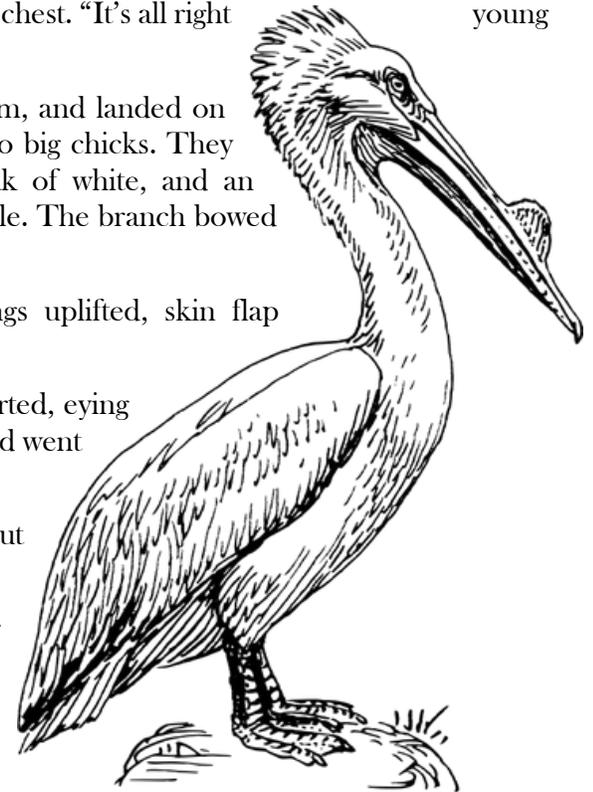
A streak of white cut through the sky, divebombed toward him, and landed on Matt’s branch. A large female pelican cawed and poked at the two big chicks. They flopped around to get to her, peeping furiously. Another streak of white, and an enormous male pelican dropped onto the branch behind the female. The branch bowed and groaned.

“Thank you, Mattrinka Grovyer!” the male cawed, his wings uplifted, skin flap wobbling under his beak with emotion.

“All right, but I think you should get off the branch—” Matt started, eying the limb as the chicks scrambled into their mother’s bill, but the bird went on.

“You have saved our little ones! We are your servants for life, but even so we can never repay this debt.”

“I don’t need servants, Pete,” Matt started, a grin flashing over his copper-colored face, but he didn’t finish the thought. A great creaking crack, and the branch crashed onto the beach, spurting up a cloud of yellow sand. Two white birds fluttered onto the beach beside it.



“We will serve you forever! Rawk! The family of Pelinram are yours to command!” Pete cawed. Matt lifted his face from the beach and spit out sand.

“Pete, I’ve known you for ten years. I think I’d rather not have you professing eternal gratitude and all that, I don’t want a pelican on my shoulder. Next time just don’t build a nest where the tides will float it out, right mate?”

“We will serve you forever!” the female cawed. It came out muffled around the large chicks. White pelicans began to drop from the sky to the beach, aged molting ones, adolescents, young couples, all of them bouncing around Pete and his brood. The white birds danced around Matt as he scrambled to his feet, covered in sea water, beach sand, and white feathers.

“We will serve you forever!” they cawed, wings lifted, beaks turned reverently skyward. “The Pelinrams are yours!”

“All right then,” Matt shrugged. He spit out more sand. “Look, I was on my way to my fiancé’s, you don’t mind if I start off again?”

“We are forever your servants!” the birds cawed.

“Right. I’ll be off then,” Matt turned and trotted away over the beach. Fifteen large birds waddled after him. He stopped and spun to the enormous male. “Call them off, will you?” Pete gave a great honking caw and flapped into the air. The rest of the family began to rise in a flurry of white feathers, and Matt’s arm shot over his face as wings beat into him. The whole flock rose into the blue sky, Pete’s mate sagging with the weight of the chicks. Matt brushed feathers off his clothes, glanced nervously at the surf (the memory of that saltwater croc would stay with him), and started to jog away from the beach.

A boy hopped over the wall, landed easily on his toes, and ran to catch up to Matt, sand spurting behind him.

“Hello, Tom,” Matt said as the boy caught up and jogged beside him. “I’m off to see Kate, if you and her brother have another duel on, you had best stay out of my way. She’ll order me to break it up.”

“Aren’t you a little...messy for visiting your fiancé?” Tom asked in surprise. “I thought people dandified for that situation. Sorry, not the right question.” Tom stopped, his back going straight, knees locking, and his hand snapped to his forehead. “Message from Captain Volm, sir!”

“Oy, no!” Matt said, backing away.

“The other mates have taken ill, you are ordered to report immediately.”

“It’s my afternoon off!”

“And King Quinsar is coming aboard early for his weekly inspection of the port’s defenses.”

“Inspection of the contents of Cully’s galley more like,” Matt growled. (A “galley,” reader, is a name for a kitchen aboard a ship, and isn’t sensible at all; it should be “kitchen.”) Tom didn’t answer. This was business, and a ship’s boy didn’t bandy words with a fourth mate. “That old fop is coming aboard early because it’s been noised around Cully has a ten pound salmon smoking in the galley.” Matt heaved a sigh and started to jog again, headed for the docks this time. They ran in silence until Matt’s old sea boots rang on the boards of the dock instead of beach sand. He suddenly stopped, rocking on his heels. “All three mates at once?”

“Yes sir,” Tom said. “Flu.”

“Anyone else in the crew come down with it?”

“No sir.”

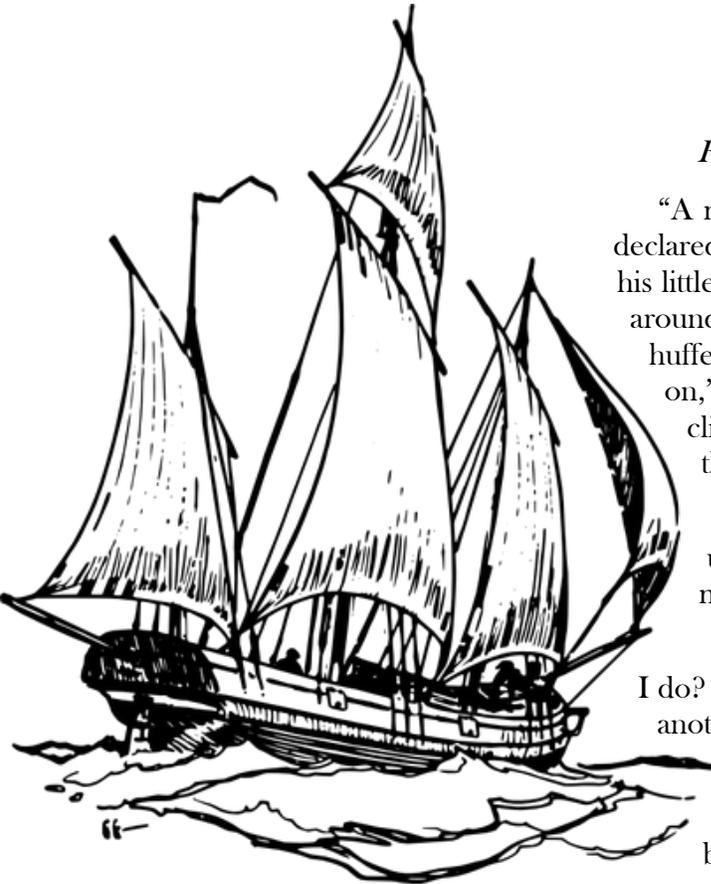
A frown settled on Matt’s face and stayed there as he dropped into the ship’s boat and pushed off from the dock. The furrow stayed on his brow and he didn’t even notice young Tom trying to keep up with his sweeping oar strokes. *The Joctroy’s Pride* rode at anchor a few fathoms from the docks, a graceful little schooner, only manned by twenty men. Her blue and white reflected off the harbor’s water and struck back at Matt as he let his boat bump gently against her hull. (Dear reader, if you want to know about words such as “hull,” or “schooner,” or “mizzenmast,” see the ship glossary in the end of the book, or the diagram at the beginning. If you want to know about words such as “anacoluthon” see a dictionary.)

“Avast, if ye chip the paint, ye’ll be the one repainting her!” Captain Volm bellowed, the noise echoing over the waters. Matt winced and Tom broke regulations and grinned at him.

“Aye sir, apologies, Captain!” Matt shouted up.

“The deck is yours,” Captain Volm bellowed back, and Matt frowned again. How could he have the deck when he wasn’t even on it yet? But Volm was a fanatic about schedules, and this was his hour for a cup of tea in his cabin; most of the hour was gone, actually. Matt didn’t grumble as he grabbed the ship’s ladder and started to clamber up.

Wood cracked and broke three inches from his ear. Matt jerked away, splinters flying around his face. An axe head gleamed in the morning sunlight, a full half of it sticking through the side of the ship.



Fifteen Months and Two Days Before Henry's Throne Room...

“A marvelous dinner, Durgum, marvelous!” Ickham Rock-Hammer declared. The faery slumped back in his chair, blowing out a happy sigh, his little brown hands clasped over his belly. A chorus of agreement ran around the room, along with a table-pounding applause. The table huffed in annoyance, muttered it wasn’t “some drum to be pounded on,” and stumped off to an inner room, empty dishes clattering and clinking on top of it. The faeries ignored it. They were too happy in their after dinner stupor.

“Very excellent, indeed,” Kyper of Herring-Bone Hill spoke up. “But,” he added, leaning forward, “the squash could have used more paprika.”

“It could have,” Durgum nodded, his face falling. “But what can I do? I used the last of my stock on that dish, and it will take a year for another decent spice shipment to make it from the islands to us.”

“It’s been two years,” Currant said dismally. She sighed, a deep sigh with the black glitter of despair lifting with it. Some black glitter settled on the rug and it started to weep.

“If any decent ships do make it to the islands, it’s a rare thing for them to make it out again,” Kyper nodded. “There are too many pirates about, more pirates than merchants. Like that Xavaport fellow.” A shiver ran through the room inside the old oak. Outside the leaves trembled without a breeze, while inside the lights (dangling from their glittering strands) danced and clinked musically together.

“I would thank you not to mention evil names here,” Durgum said. “The old place can’t take it. That X fellow, now, he’s the very best at pirating, but the worst of the lot. Pure evil so I’ve heard, and the Old Oak just proved it with a shiver.”

“Even if they did make it through the pirates,” Kyper went on undaunted, “there is still the overland trek of two hundred miles to get here. Unless...” Every faery pricked his ears, and chair legs slammed down as most stopped leaning and sat up. The rug gave an “oomph!” and stopped crying. “Unless we completed Murphey’s Tunnel.” Durgum’s eye ran over Kyper quickly, taking in the dapper clothes, roman nose, the bright violet gleam in his eyes, and the dirt under his fingernails. Red dirt.

“Even if we managed that impossible task—” Currant started.

“Not quite so impossible with a few magic twists and spins,” Kyper quickly put in.

“—it still leaves the problem of the pirates.” Currant adjusted her lacy pink frock, her wings shimmering pink. “No decent merchants can make the trip. It takes us too much dust to just pop over there, and we can’t carry enough back to make the trip worth it. We could try dragon riding again, I suppose.”

“No good, the spices make them sneeze,” said Finkle the Dragon-Maker. She would know.

“You have a scheme, Kyper,” Durgum broke in. “Out with it, what are you thinking?” A grin flashed across Kyper’s face, and all the faeries tightened, violet interest springing into their eyes. That grin was inhuman, it was faery made, an impish, sprite-like mischief maker ready to spring out into the world and shake things up.

“If we could find someone skilled enough to rid the seas of pirates (or at least get rid of enough of them to get by), the problem of the seas would be solved, and the route to the Spice Islands would lay open to us. I propose a wager! Any who want a hand in it choose themselves a captain, or troll-boat, or sperm whale, or whatever you please. The faery whose man gets rid of the top ten pirates wins the wager, and gets to watch the rest of us tunnel out Murphey’s.”

A stir, a murmuring, and a violet glow lit up the rug’s strange pattern, as the faeries’ interest grew. A few laughs slid into the air, liquid, trilling sounds that matched Kyper’s impish grin. Durgum’s cheeks pulled back in a huge smile. This sounded fun!

“A captain of our own choosing, smart enough to take care of the threats before he sails, and a tunnel route for him to the islands. Yes...yes! I like it!” Durgum’s chubby hands clapped together and he beamed at the company. “The top ten pirates are listed already in old Neenan’s place on the sea.”

“Sensible, that, already using the list,” Ickham nodded, and lifted a brown finger. “One change, if I may. It is so easy to just blast a ship out of the water, there’s very little skill in that. Say the pirates must be taken alive. Now that requires skill! And if they are taken alive, we can do what we like with them at a faery council, and that will be fun.”

“It would be fun,” Finkle the Dragon-Maker agreed, her thin lips curling in an impish smile.

“I like to see a thing done with skill,” Durgum nodded, “let’s make the amendment. The top ten pirates taken alive, for us to do what we think fit. Will you accept that, Kyper?”

“Done!” Kyper cried, and a shout lifted from the faeries, most of them leaping up and doing a jig step. The rug shouted they were ruining his threads, and the story began.



THE MEDIEVAL MUDDLES: BOOK ONE

Juvament!



A MYTHICAL MESS

J. AARON GRUBEN

JUVAMENT!: A MYTHICAL MESS

INTRODUCTION

“But I am not sure that even sensible people are always right; and this has been my principal reason for deciding to be silly—a decision that is now irrevocable.”

- G. K. Chesterton

History may never recover. A manuscript which had lain for centuries in the coal cellar at the Abby for the Monks of Perpetual Obscurity was brought to my attention. It bore 4000 some-odd pages (many very odd indeed) written by one Balgor the Wordy. In the slim hope some of it could be eventually interesting or edifying, I decided not to chuck the entire thing into the coal furnace—though I have little doubt there will be readers who wish I had. These fortunately forgotten histories, estimated by *very* smart scholars to have been composed in the 13th century, detail the customs and histories of a country previously unknown to historians called Beorcholt. After reading them, my fascination was piqued and I studied all I could about this wonderful land. The tale you hold in your hand is the result. I hope some of you find it interesting. (*Coxby and Twine’s Publishing, Ltd* recently offered a veritable fortune for it, but I turned them down and instead self-published like all the smart authors do.)

Beorcholt was an ancient kingdom we† believe once occupied an isolated strip of land which has since slid into the English Channel, leaving only massive white cliffs sheared away with the cataclysm.‡ This was the result of an unfortunate concatenation of accidents involving unusual snails and a traveling salesman... But that is a tale for another time. Before it disappeared, Beorcholt was effectively hidden from the rest of the 13th century world—to all but the most intrepid travelers—by an insurmountable range of troll-haunted mountains at its northern border, miles of impassable marshlands on its southern border, hundreds of acres of thick birch forest on its west border, and high seaside cliffs on its eastern border.

The only extant copy of a brochure from the Beorcholt Department of Tourism calls Beorcholt “the Land of Mything Links,” and I do not subscribe to Tom’s theory that it was written by a man with a lisp. Thith... I mean, this is because beings considered mythical in other parts of the world settled in the conveniently isolated Beorcholt long after they became mere wives’ tales in other lands. This gave said mythical beings a base of operations from which to sneak into other countries occasionally, frighten small children, and insinuate themselves into timeless fairy tales. It also gave me the opportunity to write about trolls and goblins and dryads.

Putting away for a moment the fun, literary façade, these are historical fantasy. They are fairy tales *loosely* anchored in history. History is fantastic... Sometimes, almost literally. The dusty pages of God’s dealing with mankind are constructed from tens of thousands of fascinating stories. Many would be unbelievable in a fantasy novel. And so, even while telling a

fairy tale, I could not refrain from anchoring it in the real 13th century. It intersects with real history occasionally, though is fully and entirely made up. The trick, of course, is in figuring out which parts are history and which are fairy tale...

Alright then... Enough introduction. On with the story...

-J. Aaron Gruben, DVM.*

†The other Beorcholt historian (Tom...who is a plumber by day) and myself.

‡At a place we call Dover

*Doctor of Vernacular Manipulation (and possibly, but much less interestingly, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine).



*A CHILD COMETH UNTO A FAIRE
AND MEETETH A FELLOW FULL OF HAIRE*

Once upon a time, which is how stories of this sort usually begin, there was a stub. And since you probably do not hail from the fair land of Beorcholt—which fell into the sea somewhere off the coast of Dover hundreds of years ago—you probably don't know what a “stub” is. Put simply, “stub” was a somewhat derogatory term used by Beorcholders for a personage of exceptional hirsute and diminutive qualities: that is a short, hairy person. And this, my good reader, is the tale of a stub and his talking pig, and the adventures that befell them: a fact I feel obliged to tell you from the start, in the event you object to stories of hairy or porcine individuals, and would rather put this book down now and read something else.

In the land of Beorcholt, within Sherring-Cross Hundred, a faire¹ was held every summer. Now, if you happened to be one of the poor peasants who visited the faire (in your time off between mowing hay fields and mucking stables), or perhaps one of the lesser noblemen who visited (in between sumptuously feasting and playing quoits), or perhaps even one of the

¹ You can tell it was a classy, olde, Renaissance-style faire, with lots of streaming pennants and colored pavilions, because it was spelled with an “e” on the end.

clerks (in between copying Scripture and singing Matins), you were sure to come across a sign. It was a gigantic sign, big as the gargoyle who once stomped out of the marshes of Rouen. It was so bedecked and belittered with brilliant ribbons of purple and gold and neon pink you could not help but notice it. And you would surely notice the words: “Behold! The Incomparable Esmond Scrunge and his Marvelously Loquacious Hog!”

If you were one of those faire-goers at Sherring-Cross Hundred² with any sense of taste, you would walk right past this sign to see something more refined—like Bernice, the Fire Juggling Maid of Gandros Mountains, or John Piper, the Man Who Plays Nineteen flutes at the Same Time (*Without Drooling*). But if you chanced to be one of the few to stop at Esmond Scrunge’s tent your senses would have been assailed (in addition to the pungent odor of gnomish fennel cakes and fried cauldron rice) by a sight you might never forget—no matter how hard you tried.

A huge and unsightly boar, with a black velvet cloak tossed over his wiry brown hair, and massively gnarled tusks tipped with gold paint, would come dashing out of the far side of the tent and stand on his hind legs with his forehooves planted precariously on an overturned apple bucket. And if you did not run away at the fearsome animal’s voluminous assault of snorting, grunting, and short squeals, you would be unfortunate enough to see another figure sprint from the far end of the tent to the rusting ring in the center and leap to stand atop the broad back of the shaggy forest boar. This would be Esmond Scrunge. Esmond was a midget of a man who looked somewhat like a grotesque cross between a Brackish Mountain dwarf and a Market City hobgoblin. He was not quite 5 foot tall, but muscular, though lean as a kumquat tree. A shocking tousel of unkempt, brown-red hair occupied the top of his head like some hairy parasite. A shaggy, red beard jutted off his face—from the very day of his birth, by some accounts—as if his hair had decided to start expanding over his chin after all the space was used up on top of his head. It buried all his mouth but a single bright tooth and all his nose but a tiny red nob. His clothes were of the most vivid hues, generally difficult in the extreme for even the most talented bard to describe.

“A *faaaaaaair* morning to you, good ladies and gentlefolk!” he would lisp, as he balanced atop the pig and pointed a gnarled digit toward the apex of the tent.

And then, if you were bold enough to stay through all of this, the most grotesque thing of all would happen. Esmond Scrunge’s pig (that’s right: the pig) would erupt, in a voice that sounded like gravel scrunched beneath the rough boots of a troll, into a recitation of Sir Loin’s famous speech to his men at the Battle of Belfry.

“Men, I know your mettle! Though an hundred gargling river giants are at this moment stomping our way, you will not turn and run. O, ye happy few! Ye band of cousins...”



² Keeping with the tradition established by William the Conqueror’s pleasantly named “Domesday Book,” Beorcholt was divided into districts called Hundreds. There were five of these: Angsward, Maine-du-Mar, Samsvelde, Sherring-Cross, and Spooqe. Angsward was the Ruling Hundred, the capital of which was Morbeam Fortress. This great palace sat atop the cliff-lined estuary of Gullsbill, and overlooked the major harbor of the kingdom. Most of Beorcholt’s population, particularly its middle working class, lived in Maine-du-Mar (which could have been called the industrial Hundred). Samsvelde was a wild, mountainous place inhabited by sturdy pioneers. Sherring-Cross was the smallest district and consisted mostly of small farms and villages on rolling, emerald hills. Spooqe most people did not talk about. It consisted of a woeful swampland called Dorcian or “Dim-Marsh” and was mostly inhabited by outlaws, marsh-hobs, defaulted debtors, and politicians. Now you know everything.

You get the idea. And doubtless, you wonder why Good Duke Orthmantle “The Clever” did not have Esmond Scrunge and his Loquacious Hog fed to the hedge cats, or thrown into the mystical Hole-in-the-Middle-Of-Nowhere. Well... This remains a mystery. However, I will show you henceforth how the surprising deeds of this man would perpetuate his name throughout all the rolling glades and towering peaks of Beorcholt for generations, despite his horrid sideshow.

But let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves.

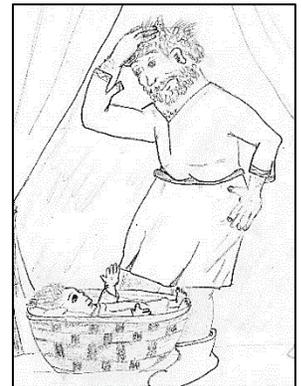
One especially blustery fall day, when the orange-tinted birch leaves for which Beorcholt is named swirled furiously about the roads and byways, Esmond Scrunge heard a noise. It was a small noise, just outside the little partition in the back of the tent he used as a bedroom. He thought at first it was the sound of a thieving cobalt that had just been caught. Then he thought it was a tiny screech mole emerging from his burrow to emit his fall mating call. Then he decided it was neither of those things, pushed his chair back from the table where he had been adding up the pitiful day’s take from faire-goers, and went to see for himself what it was. Esmond Scrunge squinted in the fading light at the last of the crowds trekking around the huddle of fancy, renaissance-style pavilionse (with an “e”) toward the road. Then he noticed something else. He was surprised to have to look down to see it—he did not often find things shorter than himself—and he twitched up one bushy eyebrow in surprise. A wicker basket sat unattended at his feet. And inside the basket, he saw a cute birch wood rattle. And under the rattle was a soft downy blanket. And inside that blanket—as I suspect you may have guessed—was a small pink baby.

The baby looked up at Esmond Scrunge and showed off several large front teeth (which were not half buried in a beard as were Esmond’s). Esmond Scrunge raised both eyebrows and stared for a whole minute. He had heard about babies but had not often seen one. They were rather a scarce specimen in Beorcholt in those days.

The baby said “**МВенннн?!**”

Esmond Scrunge held up a warning finger. “Sit! Stay!”

Esmond bounded around the entire faire but could find no one who belonged to the baby. When he returned to his tent, the basket and the baby were still there. The baby shone its teeth in a slobbery smile. Abruptly the stub picked up the basket and went into his tent. He was not a particularly fatherly or selfless man, was Esmond Scrunge, though perhaps no blackguard. But no man with half a heart, or even a quarter of a gall bladder, could just leave a baby out in that chill fall wind. He placed the basket on the little cot filling the corner of the room and went back to his table. But Esmond found it hard to go back to work and stepped back to the basket to peer curiously inside.



“**М...ММ...блен!**” said the baby.

“Quiet now!” Esmond raised a warning hand to his lips. “Garbanzo does not tolerate children.”³

The baby was not very good at being quiet, but seemed in excellent humor, and went on babbling inanities in a very loud voice—much louder than a set of lungs so small ought to produce.

“**Ааа! Да! Да! Даааа!!!**”

³ I’ve recently been made aware that Coxby and Twine (of *Coxby and Twine’s Publishers, Ltd.*) are in agreement with Garbanzo. Listed 1st under publishing guidelines on their webpage: “Do not, under any circumstances, submit a manuscript written by a baby.” And on their bio page Coxby is quoted as saying, “I do not like babies, and am certain I’ve never been one.”

Esmond's eyes grew big, and he hurriedly picked the child up in his hairy hands, trying awkwardly to quiet it. A large, shaggy, porcine head poked around the draped partition which formed Esmond's room. The boar's tusks glittered in the candlelight, and a poet might have said his proportionately minuscule, porcine eyes seemed to shimmer with the primal instincts of his feral forest ancestors. A reasonable person would not have cared about his eyes. The tiny clip-clop of his hooves and the swing of his massive haunch did something to spoil the tusks' fearsome effects. Any residual terrifying aura the hog might have exuded was vaporized the moment his large mouth opened and poured deep and gravelly words, like a stream overflowing its banks. Like an annoying, bubbling, unstoppable stream.

"I say, Esmond, old chump... Did you hear someth— by Gamelin's spear! I'd know that pink, rounded nubbin o' a head any old day. 'Tis a shaveling, 'tis!⁴ Why me ol' Aunt Ermiline once adopted a human child—looked much like that one, it did, though blast me if they don't all look the same—and raised 'im in the woods. Then she sent him out into the wide world. The poor fella' grew confused, I heard. Constantly rooted about the ground for truffles. Wallowed in mud holes in the center of Gamptowne's square, right in front of the mayor, they say. And after he'd got a wife and a litter of four! Well, 'a chap with transplanted roots don't know where to root,' me ol' Uncle Corktail once said. Anyhoo... Where'd you find the little creature?"

Esmond barely had time to say "outside in a basket" before the hog's flood of narrative continued. Yes indeed, Esmond's friend Horace was a genuine oracular beast. The hog could talk, but Esmond had long ago found the hard thing was to get him to stop talking. "Well, it does seem the right sort o' weather for dropping baskets full o' shavelings," Horace continued, barely pausing for a grandiose snort of air before he rushed on. "Just like me old Uncle Hamburg found me little nephew years ago! Grind me to sausage if it isn't the day to find a baby in a basket! Does it have a name, or do you..."

Esmond let the current of words trickle into background noise. His arms were aching, but he feared to change the baby's position. "What are you called, I wonder? I suppose you're a she..." he squinted down at the little bundle covered in a purple smock and flowered bonnet. "Perhaps Lucretia..." He had always been fond of the name. The Baby blinked for a moment at Esmond Scrunge's bushy face with a sort of shocked expression. The face she made even rendered Horace speechless.

"A...a... WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Esmond Scrunge almost dropped the baby in an attempt to find his ears inside his beard and cover them up. It had never occurred to him that such a small, pink creature could make such a loud, blue sound. He quickly set the baby back into the basket, but this did not help. Horace ran out of the room squealing, "It don't like 'Lucretia!' Never call it 'Lucretia!'"

"Ack!" choked Esmond, waving frenetic arms in despondency as the shaveling let out noises like a yodeling Samsvelder with a megaphone in a box canyon. "Help me quiet her, Horace!" He danced up and down and grimaced at the baby, but that only made her cry more. "Gitchie! Gitchie! Gooo!" he chortled as he tickled the baby under the chin. He remembered vaguely his fiancé doing something like that to a baby. This understandably made the little one twice as loud.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

Esmond was very worried. Surely the child could be heard, even over the wailing wind: and Garbanzo *really* did not like children.

⁴ An archaic word sometimes used for a young human: one too young to shave.

“Food... Give it food!” The ugly head of the hog poked its way through the partition, squinting and grimacing at the ugly sound. “Food always makes hoglings happy.”

Esmond offered The Baby the remnants of a meat pie and some beer, but she waved her arms so hard in her distress it fell to the floor untasted. He grabbed an apple and put it in The Baby’s lap, but this still did not pacify her. “What do they like to eat?” he screamed at Horace, trying to be heard over the shrieks filling the night air.

“Goodness gracious!” murmured the hog, his beady eyes twitching this way and that in concentration. “What indeed? What indeed! Bless me! Bless me if I really don’t know! Goodness me. How would some o’ my slop do for her?” Esmond shrugged and splashed a pile of Horace’s slop before The Baby. She kept crying.

It was at that very moment both Esmond and the hog heard the clippity clop of large hooves outside the pavilion, moments before the flap was thrown open and a gust of cold wind swept the small interior. Esmond and his friend turned deadly pale, and even the baby stopped crying at the sudden apparition. There, outlined in the fading autumn light, vast and magnificent, stood a man... No, a horse... No... A horse-man. A centaur!⁵ A centaur stood there. His gilded jacket was curled up in spikes at the shoulders, an old and impossible looking key dangled from a silver chain against his hairy chest, and he wore a bright orange cloak and multicolored top-hat. A deep, deep scowl curled his lips and furrowed his brow as he glared down at them. Garbanzo the Magnificent had heard the baby!



*A FATEFUL CHOICE HEREIN IS MADETH
THAT JUST MIGHT GET THE AUTHOR PAIDETH*

Garbanzo the Magnificent was a centaur of stately appearance and proud mien. Unfortunately, Garbanzo was less a noble son of Chiron than one of the unruly and selfish sons of Ixion, who were said to fall from the cloud eons before, primed for mischief and general crankiness. The owner and manager of the Sherring-Cross Hundred Faire (spelled with an “e” in classy Renaissance manner), he often claimed it was the pressure of being a small business owner in an unfair world that

⁵ An intriguing characteristic of Beorcholt history is the frequent reference to mythological creatures like centaurs, trolls, elves, and even talking pigs. This could mean several things... A) Chronicallers like Blagor the Wordy were frauds, fibbers, and lying liar who lie. B) Creatures considered mythical in other parts of the world were alive and real in Beorcholt, given Beorcholt’s extremely convenient geographical isolation and later complete destruction in The Great Schism.* C) Some mysterious present day novelist, brilliantly creative and unbelievably handsome, wrote a fantasy story with mythical creatures but could not forgo including occasional reference to historical 13th century, and consequently made the whole country of Beorcholt up out of his astonishingly clever brain. Personally, I favor option C.

*The Great Schism was not a theological debate nor the famous Beorcholt debate regarding green or red chiles. It is the cataclysmic earthquake which opened a mile wide crack in the ground and slid Beorcholt into the ocean. (To clarify, the country of Beorcholt was never heard of again. People heard of the ocean again.)

made him cross. But as reality often tends to be, the truth was simpler: he was just a nasty, selfish person. It was he who scoured the kingdom of Beorcholt and far lands beyond to bring the good peasantry of Sherring-Cross such quality family entertainment as Flamgar the Fluting Goblin, Hermie the Upside-Down Man, Dougal the Arithmetical She-Wolf, and, of course, Esmond and his Loquacious Hog. He had every conceivable type of being displayed in vivid, and sometimes rather odd, showmanship.⁶ Every type of being that is, except a baby. Garbanzo despised babies.⁷ Their cute pinkness annoyed him, their complete dependence irritated him, their obnoxious cries drove him to distraction, and they were constantly getting in the way of business.

"EEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAHHHH!!!!" shrieked The Baby—speaking of obnoxious cries.

Garbanzo the Magnificent frowned deeply some more, leaned over the basket to scowl at the baby in the hopes of frightening her into silence, and then gestured Esmond before clop-clipping⁸ away from the tent. Esmond left The Baby in the care of poor Horace, who vainly offered her some of his choicest truffles.

"*What* is that?" Garbanzo sternly inquired, giving off a regally injurious look and jabbing a thumb in the direction of the screaming tent.

"It's a shaveling I found sitting in a basket behind my tent, Garbanzo," Esmond replied, attempting his most disarming smile,⁹ while the sounds of screams and squeals issued from the tent. Esmond colored as he noted people poking their heads out of the surrounding pavilions to glare in irritation at the noise and argument. "She started crying, and we have been trying to make her stop."

"Well, put her right back where you found her," Garbanzo replied gruffly. "I'm sure her mother will find her soon enough."

"But I looked all round the faire, and her mother is not here."

"Then her mother will come in the morning. Put her back, and there's an end to it."

Esmond pulled his cloak tight against the chill, blustery night. Sitting a baby out in a basket on a night like this was not a good plan. "I don't think that would be good for her, Garbanzo. I will keep her in my tent tonight and try to find her home tomorrow."

The regal centaur scowled for a moment in silence. "Look here," his tone became suddenly shrewd and very matter-of-fact. "We are both men of the world, Esmond, and might as well not beat about the gorse-bush. We know her mother is not going to be found. Parents have been abandoning their babies since the KingdomHealthAct! became law. Nobody in their right mind is going to claim her. Take her at once to the Royal Orphan Care Office."¹⁰

⁶ *Coxby and Twine's Publishing, Ltd.* notes, "No manuscript shall be considered that references fantasy creatures such as goblins, centaurs, or well-rested mothers of preschoolers." Twine is quoted, "I once had a goblin for a pet when I was 10, and I positively refuse to print a word about the beastly things." This leads me to wonder why they want my manuscript.

⁷ Well... That, and he had a wise business owner's sense there could be legal/ethical repercussions to displaying a baby as a faire side show.

⁸ He was walking backwards now.

⁹ Garbanzo's arms both remained attached despite the grin.

¹⁰ The ruler of Beorcholt was Beregoth I and under his reign a series of healthcare reform bills called KingdomHealthAct! was enacted. The general effect was to centralize healthcare and consolidate the private medical insurance companies into two government sanctioned ones. These were the Gorps Organized Reliability Fund and the Bristlebrow Associated Medical Group. Both were run by troll families from the wild-country north of Beorcholt who had insinuated themselves with surprising rapidity. Every Beorcholter had to purchase medical insurance from BAMG or GORF. And monthly premiums drastically increased with the addition of family members. Consequently, the size of families dropped rapidly. In a climate where children were largely viewed as disruptions to "the good life" already, the Act plummeted the birthrate and caused child abandonment. This sad statistic necessitated the Royal Orphan Care Office (ROCO). There is debate about why the KingdomHealthAct! was

Esmond hesitated, thinking hard. He had once seen a ragtag group of abandoned children taken in by the Royal Orphan Care Office, and the memory of their haggard faces and terrible condition still haunted him. In fact, he had seen a few officers of ROCO and did not like the thought of sending The Baby to them. “I...I think... O Magnificent Garbanzo, I’d best keep her until her parents are found.”

“You do that, you runty stub, and you are out in the gutter where I first found you and your hog in a drunk stupor¹¹,” came the stern reply. “I forbid you to keep that baby in my faire a moment longer!”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!”

The Baby’s wails were pitiful and grated horribly on Esmond’s ears. Suddenly, despite the nasty sounds, he felt this shaveling needed a friend. Stubborn determination bred into a long and ancient line of Scrunge—that Esmond knew little about—flared up in his breast. Along with a long-held dislike of Garbanzo. His knobby fists doubled and his toothy teeth clenched. “Then I’ll leave,” he growled.

Garbanzo was silent for a very short time before he replied curtly. “Go then! I can easily find someone to replace you. Someone who does not bring inconvenient and annoying shavelings! Begone! Never come back!” He turned and clopped away into the blustery night.

Esmond Scrunge stood looking after him, a dozen or so furious and unprintable adjectives clopping through his hirsute head. Then he turned on his heel and stormed back into the tent. The Baby had stopped crying to quite suddenly fall asleep. Horace regained all his truffles, right as Esmond came in and told him to pack the rest of his things.

“We’re sacked,” he snorted, “on account of this baby. I will not leave her out in the cold. I hate working here anyway, and Garbanzo can see how well his faire fares without us now! ‘Runty stub’ indeed! Oh, clever! As if I have never heard that one before...”

Horace looked as downcast as a hog can look at these tidings and would have had lots to say if he had not been completely winded by recently pleading with a wailing baby. So he simply trotted into his room to gather his few porcine possessions.

Packing for a trip is a lot simpler when you do not actually own anything. Esmond tended toward a minimalist lifestyle, mostly due to his minimal income. He packed the two suits of clothes he owned—one to wear for a few days while he got around to washing the other. He packed his entire collection of cutlery and cooking equipment—a tin cup and a steel spork. He packed a bag of geedunk¹² and a loaf of bread. A small shimmering silver flask, engraved with a sea-mule and Esmond’s initials, was tossed into his satchel as well. He owned one treasure, kept locked in a wide, wooden box. It was a beautifully wrought bow, made of aged birch wood and inlaid with silver filigree, with leaves shaped out of thinly hammered copper. It was a gift passed down from his great-great-grandfather. It had been used in the Troll Wars and was named *Gorpswasp*, or Gorps’ Wasp. “Whatever a Gorps is!” the teen Esmond had thought laughingly when he heard the tale. This treasure he pulled from its box and slung over his back, sighing as he thought of the brave deeds he would never do with it.

never written without an exclamation point, but the prevailing theory among Beorcholt historians (especially Tom) is this was a gimmick to increase it’s appeal.

¹¹ A drunken hog is not a pretty sight.

¹² A hard granola mixture often eaten in Sherring-Cross, especially on journeys.

Esmond took up his walking stick, or *shlighleigheighie* as they called them in Beorcholt. This was of most gorgeous workmanship, carved of solid oak by his own hand and wrought into the shape of a dragon's head at its knobby end. Horace showed his face again, carrying a small sack in his mouth of whatever it is pigs possess, and Esmond tied the basket and baby securely onto the hog's back.

This woke her, and she frowned fiercely before crying again. **"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"**

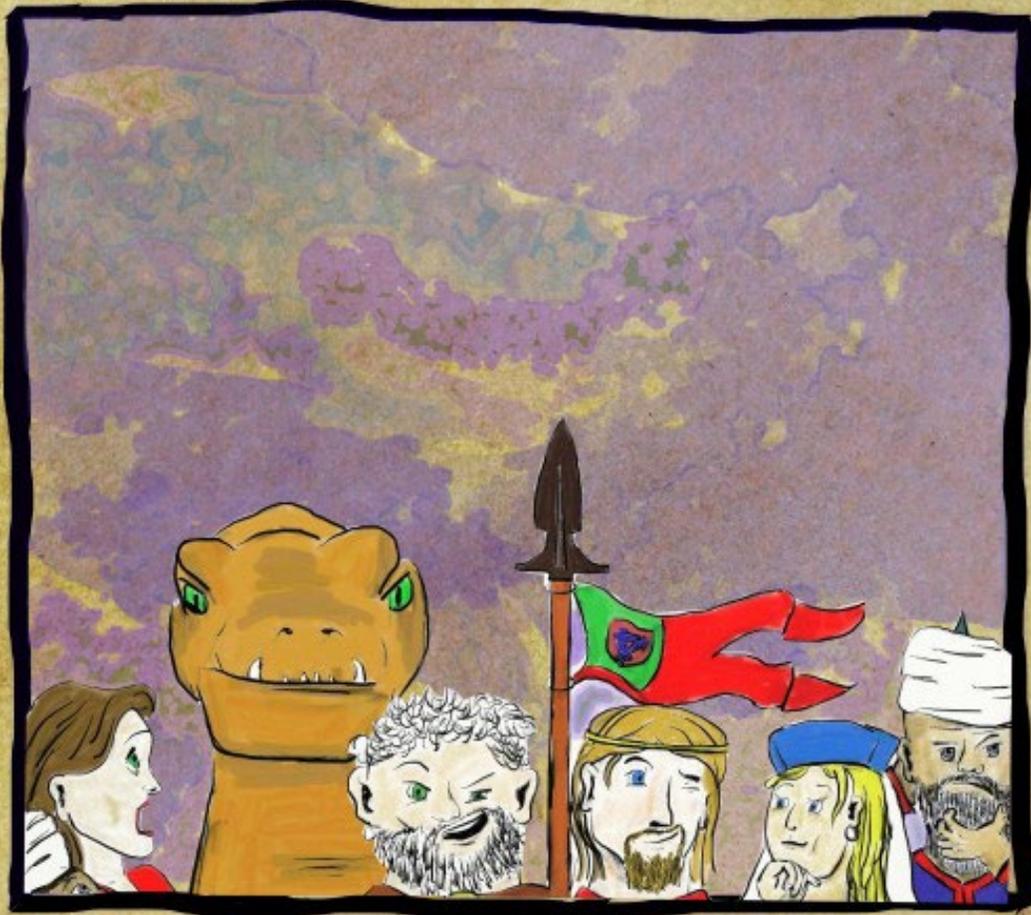
And the shaveling's wailing mingled with the wail of the chill night air and the croaking of the toadbirds¹³ as Esmond tucked her closely in her blankets, lifted the tent flap for the last time, and set out with his hog and newfound shaveling to find the night road.

Horace sighed, an odd noise from a pig. Esmond set his teeth and set his feet moving away from the life he had known so long at the Faire. He did not look back.

¹³ This strange avian specimen was found exclusively on the lower moors of Sherring-Cross, and likely resembled today's frogmouth. The toadbird was stocky, with a broad head and bill, dark feathers, and flame red eyes. It nibbled just about anything smaller than itself, probably not with any sort of daintiness. Its characteristic croaking was heard especially loudly in fall nights on the moor.

THE MUBBLEFUBBLES

A TOOTHY TANGLE



J. AARON GRUBEN

THE MEDIEVAL MUDDLES: BOOK 2

THE MUBBLEFUBBLES: A TOOTHY TANGLE

A BORING INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Welcome to another tale time has forgotten. Many might call this fortunate, but hold your judgment until the end. These “fortunately forgotten histories” are historical fantasy. They are fairy tales *loosely* anchored in history. History is fantastic... Sometimes, almost literally. The dusty pages of God’s dealing with mankind that form history are constructed from tens of thousands of fascinating tales. Many of them would be unbelievable in a fantasy novel. And so, even while telling a fairy tale, I could not refrain from anchoring it in the real world of the 13th century. It intersects with our history at times, but is also made up out of my own strange brain. The trick, of course, is in figuring out which parts are history and which are fairy tale.

Beorcholt, “Land of Mything Links,” is a country you might have read about in an earlier time. It used to lie across the English Channel† from the place this tale begins. But Beorcholt’s populace (both human and otherwise) have much to do with it. If you read the book before this° you may recall a fellow by the name of Alaric promising a certain Egyptian emissary the names of two men qualified to slay a dragon. The incredible adventures of those two men are the subject of the pages that follow.

~J. Aaron Gruben, DVM.*

†That is, it did before it slid off into the ocean and was never heard from for a thousand years (which is convenient for guys like me who write quasi-fantasy-mangled-histories).

°And if you did not... For shame, for shame! Go buy it immediately. This is my completely unbiased advice.

*Doctor of Vernacular Manipulation (and possibly, but much less interestingly, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine).

A BORING HISTORICAL NOTE

Because this is quasi-historic fiction, I feel the strange urge to include a boring introductory note, full of names and dates you will not recognize. I’m just going to make them all up on the spot, so you may as well skip it and go to Chapter One.

The period in which this story takes place was a period of fluctuation and struggle. In the west the infamous wars over the Norman throne were just reaching their ebb, the great Morovian and Aquitainian schism rent the Franks into fractions, and the lords of the river Sur-Mer vied for power. Duke Guilleme “the Ancient” (r. 1111-1698) annexed nearly the whole of Buldovia, tipping the balance of power in the north to favor his beloved Antiochene monks of the order of St. Scatha.

In the east the Bulgars and Quipchaks harried the Empire of Eastern Rome, the Green and Baby Blue factions struggled for power over the young emperor, and Alexis Triathalon wrote his famed *Historia Eastonia Wackyatricka* which started a literary revolution among the elite of Byzantium. Ali Zin-Babza, the great Pasha of Scanduc rose to power in 1243, putting the entire Absuyid royal family to the sword. Along the Nile, Bayuk “the Grandiose” built his fleet which was destined to sail to Greece and steal the secrets of the gyro and baklava.

But in the midst of all these spurious events was a real change. This was the change in the taste of the people of southern France to the relatively new and upstart “courtly love songs”—and it is this change that really begins our tale.

ONE

A shape, black as a hell-shade, slithered silently beneath the salt waves. Its forty feet of misshapen, scaly, natural disaster, had roamed far from the land of its spawning. It sensed now the thrum of breakers on a shoreline and slid toward the vibrations. The wooden curve of a ship’s keel glided above it. A gurgling growl emanated slowly from its monstrous gizzard (or whatever organ sea monster growls generally emanate from), while men above gaped and quivered at its massive shadow. It would not stop for one ship when it sensed there were many of them ahead. It was too hungry for just one morsel.

But our tale doesn’t begin with this nightmarish beast...

No...

This tale begins in the fairest part of the earth, wherein the sun glistens like wine upon the sparkling verdure fields, its rivers fair and placid as that River Ocean of old, and whose inhabitants dwell closer than any upon the center of earth’s great disk to the eternal blitheness of those famed and envied Hyperboreans¹⁴ beyond the northern hills. Here surely those gods of our pagan grandsires would have fain crossed their cloud gates (patrolled by the seasons fair upon Mount Olympus), to see the cause of that great mirth, that cheer, that love springing eternal in the hearts of the men and ladies fair...

At least, that is what Alphonse would have told you.

Alphonse was a troubadour in a place called Toulouse, in southern France. He lived during that golden old age when great lords and fair ladies held court in giant stone castles and needed people to sing songs and tell stories because movies hadn’t been invented yet.

¹⁴ There are some words I actually did not make up in this book. The definitions are in the glossary. (Not the glossary in Appendix A. I advise you to close your eyes, turn the page, and avoid looking at Appendix A at all. It is just embarrassing.)

Alphonse had long and carefully combed hair flowing down to his shoulders, and a trim mustache riding over his thin lips. He was muscular like a chimpanzee is muscular: with wiry arms deceptively strong enough to hold himself from a tree branch for a full hour. Though Alphonse never hung from tree branches. That might tear his expensive clothes. He dressed in the brightest colors, and showiest trimmings. Folk usually mistook him either for a great lord or a great lord's idiot. But Alphonse more than compensated for his gaudy looks by his skillful music. He played upon a golden harp and sung with a golden voice, and his love songs were famed near to far, and back around to near again.

You see, this was a time in that particular part of France when the grisly old chansons, all about heroes and daring warlike prowess, were replaced by fashionable songs and poems of courtly love. Lords and ladies no longer wanted to hear about bold Roland, who could split a Saracen in two and kill his horse beneath him with one blow of his sword, merely because he happened to be at war. Nope. If it had to be war-like at all, what they wanted to hear went more like this:

“And Miramont fair, smote his breast in the agony of passion while he waited on the list, the gentle token of his lady wound about his arm like the hand of Eros herself flung from her egg of night to create our great earth with her kindly arrows. Then, with thundering hooves, his steed Falandalel sprung him forth and, lowering his lance with great skill, so that it seemed the very tip of iron must have moved like unto some great work of Vulcan, smote he the black knight and sent him to his ruin whilst his lady cheered. He turned him and rode toward her, and she, knowing him to have lent his prowess in the service of her love, blew him a kiss.”

Folk those days preferred, even more, a peaceful poem or a song praising the virtues of any particular lady...

“Oh, Anaïs, fairest of virgins on the earth!

Thy hand, swan-white and soft, can only grant me mirth.

Thy smile is brightness in these halls.

Thy hair a pure stream gently falls.

Your love, a tyrant, holds me thrall.

For your slightest whim, I yield my all!”

All pretty disgusting stuff, really. But at the time it was all the rage, and Alphonse was a master at it. Yes, Alphonse was a bard in high demand indeed.

But, now that I think about it, this story does not begin with Alphonse either. It begins with his cousin, Theudebald, who was also a troubadour.

I doubt if there were ever two cousins less alike than Alphonse and Theudebald. Where Alphonse was tall, Theudebald was short. Where Alphonse was thin as an aspen and had the build of a vegan marathoner, Theudebald was thick as an oak

with a broad chest like a carnivorous pro-wrestler. He sometimes had to go on a diet just to shift over old muscles to make room for new ones. Alphonse's face was gentle and nearly angelic,¹⁵ Theudebald's was shaggy like a half-shaven baboon—with dark bulging eyes that stuck out above high cheekbones, hidden deep within a shaggy black beard. If Alphonse was like a heavenly angel, Theudebald was a bit more like those creepy, multi-orbed seraphim in the Old Testament with lots of wings. While the features of Alphonse might have been chiseled from stone by some Greek poet, those of Theudebald might have been scratched with charcoal by pre-diluvium man.

And in keeping with his looks, Theudebald was a jongleur of the old school at heart and had absolutely no talent or inclination for the new fashion of courtly love songs. As a matter of pure fact, he hated the stuff. He much preferred to sing great ballads of his hero, Count Raymond IV of Toulouse, and praise that worthy's bold prowess upon the walls of Antioch in the most vivid and grisly terms. But he had to eat,¹⁶ and folk seemed to have no use for the songs he would like to sing. So he tried his very best at being romantic. But he just did not have the knack. He was too dark and somber.

His last attempt had been a song composed for the praise of the lady-love of a great lord in Montpellier, and I'm sorry to say the following is an accurate translation...

“Ah, Ophelia, fairest of maids,
Thy hair, like sword steel, barely fades.
Thy skin, the hue of whitest starch.
Thy toes, like soldiers, gently march.
Endearing love shall be my cry,
For thee, I'd give my pasty-pie.”

Needless to say, he was hied from the castle without hesitation—or pay. It was not long before Theudebald's service was only required when someone wanted a joke.

The day this particular story begins Thisdane, Lord of Narbonne and a particularly ardent patron of the art of courtly love, called upon the services of Theudebald and Alphonse to entertain his guests.¹⁷ Alphonse had just dazzled the court with a song to the lady of the manor which won him sighs from the entire audience, and caused one or two ladies to swoon—

¹⁵ Though his father would have used a different metaphor.

¹⁶ Quite a bit actually, in order to keep those many muscles fueled.

¹⁷ You should be thankful, dear reader, you were not born a lord of those days—for it was a longstanding expectation any lord with a castle be beset by hundreds of moochers, who would descend like locusts, filling their halls and emptying their larders, and demanding entertainment at their expense.

and incidentally brought showers of bezants upon his head. It was at this juncture the lady of the house got up from her seat upon the dais and spoke thus-wise:

“Well and sweetly sung, fair troubadour! Your fame has bespoken of you aright. However, methinks my ears have been overfilled with courtly love songs of late, and I wouldst hear some of those ghastly chansons my grandfather used to like. Knowest thou any of these?” Whereupon the rest of the guests in the court began to shift uneasily, as people of all ages do when they realize *that* guy is about to show up at the party and make everything really, really awkward. Alphonse (as always) had a smooth reply.

“Oh my lady, I wouldst be glad to oblige you in any way, so fair is your face and comely your form, so kind your words, so wondrous your graces, so...” at this point, Alphonse noted the lord of the manor glaring suspiciously, and broke off his colloquy. “But methinks my good cousin, Theudebald the Strong, who was raised on his father’s knee from a babe,¹⁸ in the hearing of those great tales of mighty daring, would be best qualified to delight you most with such a song.”

Theudebald stood abruptly and his eyes shot sparks of excitement. He approached the dais with unslung harp, looking so hard from beneath his bushy beard at the lord and lady that they backed up a few inches in their chairs. A few gentlefolk who had been around the court scene long enough to encounter Theudebald before groaned and slapped their palms to their fair faces. Theudebald did not seem to notice, but spoke in a firm voice, as he struck a minor cord that rebounded off the walls of the hall.

“Ah! Right gladly will I tell thee the tale of a great hero,

A man that the Germans adore,

Who smote a dragon in all his gore!

Siegfried strong a hero was,

Of the Niebelungs, a prince,

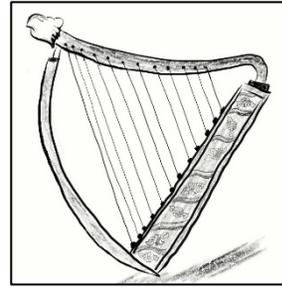
And guardian of fabulous wealth that glints.

The worm, full vile, guarded this hoard.”

Here one of the bolder guests laughed aloud. “A worm, eh? I’m surprised, bard. Children’s fay-tales of imaginary dragons little befit your reputation for...er...realism!” Laughter echoed through the hall. Theudebald bore a sly look and, unfortunately, took up the challenge for more realism.

¹⁸ This is not quite what Alphonse meant. Though perfect in his bard-dom in every other respect, he was apt to misplace his modifiers when he got excited. This is a common mistake for people tending to pile a hundred words into every sentence.

“Siegfried bold took up his sword!
With cat-like tread, he stole close,
One sturdy blow the worm he smote,
And out like cheese curds flowéd forth
Gallon upon gallon, the blood forth streamed
Like sticky...”



He did not notice the lady of the manor’s eyes grow large as a saucer full of rancid blood-pudding, or her face turn white as a three-day-old corpse. As the grisly descriptions continued to flow like spurting arteries, she let out a shriek of terror and fell to the ground in an abrupt faint.¹⁹ Most of the guests spat out their food in disgust. Theudebald continued on obliviously. Alphonse, a bit more in tune with the tastes of the gentle folk, stepped forward quickly. Snatching Theudebald’s harp from the still singing bard, he looked down and addressed the lord of the manor (who was kneeling on the ground trying to revive his lady).

“I beg pardon, my liege, but my cousin and I must haste to depart to another manor for I just remembered we are engaged in the next county, and we will be tardy if we do not leave posthaste! Come, Theudebald!” This he said in a voice rising higher and higher for Theudebald continued his grisly ballad, loath to quit now he finally had a chance to sing what he loved. “Posthaste!” Alphonse repeated and tugged on his cousin’s cloak to drag him to the door. Theudebald shouted out his verses, growing more and more desperate as his cousin jerked him through the door and slammed it in place.

Once outside the castle, Alphonse stopped and mopped his brow in relief, leaning against the wall. “Whew! That was a close shave, my bold cousin!”

The rage of a thousand long-dead heroes fired Theudebald’s eyes.

“Why did you stop me, coz? At last a lady requested something other than those disgusting poems. It was my moment of fame, and you stopped me!”

Alphonse looked indulgently at his cousin. “No coz, ‘twas your moment of infamy. Think first ere you vex the ears of a gentle lady with your gory ballads! The noble folk don’t truly want such things.”

Theudebald stared at his cousin for roughly 2.45 second before he ran to jump on his horse and gallop through the castle gates. Alphonse, when he had recovered from the shock of the swift departure, ran to his horse and followed. Theudebald raced uncaring over the brilliant meadows and vineyards (squishing grapes and causing peasants to leap out of

¹⁹ Just to be clear, this was a very different kind of faint from the Alphonse-induced syncopal episodes mentioned earlier.

his way in alarm). He rushed on till he was forced to come to a halt by a high cliff that overlooked the sea. Alphonse reined in and dismounted beside his cousin to find him staring upon the setting sun as it shimmered along the placid waves of the French coastline. Three fishing boats lay at sea with their nets thrown into the water as peaceful villagers from L'fishe (a little known, and very possibly made up, village near Narbonne) lounged upon the wharf. Alphonse was surprised to see the glitter of what could have been a tear in his rough cousin's eye.

“Fie, coz! You led a merry chase!” quoth²⁰ Alphonse, blowing hard.

Theudebald looked upon him uncaring. “Why chase after a failure, Alphonse? You should leave me to die! Alone. A has-been. A pauper... In pence and in prose.”

Alphonse nobly refrained from chuckling at his cousin's melodrama. This was an ironic role reversal for the two cousins. It was generally Alphonse who tended toward morbid introspection and depressing blues, a state of mind medieval folk sometimes called “the mubblefubbles.”²¹ But Theudebald was as much of an artist in his own way as Alphonse. And artists have always been sensitive souls, and their deep feelings shall always be the strongest magnet for the mubblefubbles among mankind.

“Where's that merry spirit you used to show when you were but a babe in yon village, a-frighting all the girls and making the dogs bark when ere you lifted your face out of the bassinet? Where's the lad whose gladsome pranks folk here still remember, eh? The bishop talks to this day with horror of that painted goat you slipped into the baptismal on the night Lady Grizwelda's baby was christened. Where's that brute of a fellow boisterous enough to argue perpetually with me about the merits of venery²² over noble hawking?” The merry twinkle in Alphonse's eyes faded as he searched in vain beneath his cousin's bushy beard for a sign of merriment.

Theudebald snorted and waved his hand dismissively. “I'm in no mood for jest! I am a failure. Whenever I try to sing a love song they laugh, and when I sing a ballad they spit out their food! I was born a jongleur for an older age, and my name is but a joke. If I wish to redeem it, I must find a new path for my great, burly feet.” He stroked his beard and stared at his burly feet thoughtfully, “Hm, perhaps that's it...”

Alphonse recognized the gesture. He pointed a finger and blurted, “Ah, I like not the look of that shaggy head of thine!”

Theudebald, used to his cousin's overused adjectives, did not bat an eye at this apparent insult. “If you meant you don't like what I'm thinking—” His words were cut off by a strangled scream from below the cliff and a rending and crashing of

²⁰ Alphonse had a tendency to “quoth” more than “said.”

²¹ In my opinion this should immediately be reintroduced into every modern dictionary. It's loads of fun to say “Oy! I've got the mubblefubbles!” Try it. I'm sure you'll agree.

²² In medieval times this was hunting with hounds. (A modern, completely unrelated, definition is “indulging in lascivious pleasure,” so be careful how you use the word!) There was a raging medieval debate about whether hunting with dogs or hawks was more fun. It was serious business to menfolk of those days, who did not have pro-sports teams or social media. When your typical 12th century noble was not fighting he would be hunting... And maybe after that he would spend time with his wife and kids. So the preference of venery (more brutal and warlike and risky) over hawking (more intricate and technically demanding) may have been worth coming to blows over. Certainly the cousins had suffered bloodied noses more than once over the topic.

wood. One of the three fishing boats flew twenty feet above a boiling sea, in a sudden shower of splinters. Both cousins stood rooted, the conversation utterly quashed by an unbelievable sight.

The thrashing waves were entirely filled with the writhing, serpentine neck of a vast sea dragon! The creature's slimy skin flashed in the sunlight, thick as armor over its hellish heart. Its great maw flung open to the heavens, revealing a tangle of wicked, needle-like teeth pointing this way and that around its flailing tongue. A great crashing, grating roar echoed off the cliff face and over the rolling seaside. It was as though all the sea were boiling in the brute's stomach and needed to let out steam. The bards covered their ears and their two horses raced off in terror.

"By the rood!" Alphonse whispered. "That cannot be possible."

Theudebald could scarce speak in astonishment. He pointed a trembling finger at the forms of flailing fisherman. They disappeared beneath the mountainous waves, which sprung up as the great serpent plunged its monstrous head into the water. Its body rose behind the submerging neck like some high hill, revealing four great fins like giant galley oars before it slipped under the boiling waves and became a colossal shadow under the surface of the harbor.

"That was Berinon's boat!" Alphonse heard the heartbroken croak from his cousin just before he saw Theudebald leap over the cliff.

"Theudebald!" shrieked Alphonse as a hairy form flew through the air. Theudebald straightened to dive into the icy waters just before he met the thrashing waves. Alphonse ran as fast as he could down the tiny footpath toward the village, trembling and cursing his crazy cousin under his breath. Alphonse had grown up as Theudebald's constant companion and loved him like a brother. He knew well Theudebald was sometimes more seal than human, having spent the majority of his childhood swimming from his brother Berinon's fishing boat.

Alphonse (who swam more like a rock than a seal) was forced to commandeer a small skiff at the shoreline. This was not difficult, for every villager had abandoned their boats and sprinted toward the safety of the village. With trembling hands, the fair-haired bard maneuvered the craft over the boisterous waves as it tipped and wobbled, nearly capsizing again and again. But though he could not swim (or perhaps because of this) Alphonse was rather good at handling oars, and the bard kept the little boat afloat over the roiling eddies. He glided steadily toward Theudebald's bobbing head. Theudebald was treading water amid the splinters and wreckage of his brother's boat and calling Berinon's name wildly. The only answer was a great rumble from beneath the salty waters, gargantuan and visceral, as if the ocean had a tummy ache. A monstrous shadow passed below the rough bard's flailing feet, and he fought to keep from being pulled under by the deep current. Berinon's hat bobbed to the surface.

Alphonse watched in a trance as the shadow slid toward the edge of the harbor and gradually faded away. Then the bard remembered himself and tugged his cousin into the boat.

"Theudebald! Come on, Theudebald!" As he was dragged into the boat, they noted a floating form to the right. It was the broken body of Berinon. They pulled it from the cold salt waters with shaking fingers. Theudebald laid the limp head on his lap, a single tear falling down his rough beard. He was silent as a stone while they pulled to shore, and even Alphonse

did not know what to say. So he said nothing. The little craft struck the shore. Theudebald carried the corpse, and an aged sailor who had been bold enough to stay and watch the unnatural spectacle of the sea monster's attack, helped him lay the body down. Alphonse dragged the boat onto the sandy beach and reached them a moment later. He found his cousin facing the still raging sea with clenched fists and trembling frame. A rage more intense than Alphonse had ever seen fairly sparked from his cousin's dark eyes.

"Curse you, foul beast!" Theudebald shouted suddenly into the silent wind. "Curse your monstrous heart! Curse your slimy scales! Berinon shall be avenged. I'll slay you!"

Alphonse put a hand upon his cousin's shoulder. "Come now coz, there's no vengeance to be had on the brute beast."

"Aye!" it was the old sailor who spoke, in a voice cracked and aged like the rocks along the shore. "It be plain fadoodle t' blore 'gainst the 'and of Judgment." He continued his unsolicited but sage advice, with all the proper odd and arcane words an old medieval fisherman ought to use. "Oi ain't no hufty-tufty, but me wink-a-peeps 'ave looked on one other serpent of the deep, years ago: an' t'were on the self-same ship on which a murtherer took berth. Mark me, lad: dragons, whether they swim in the sea or tromp upon villages, be real. But they be no mere beasts. They be the Judgment o' God, in a serpent's carcass! Aye, more! Some says they's more likely the ol' killbuck devil 'imself than animal of flesh an' blood. An' there's no use a-railin' and a-cursin' that sort of fiend now, is there?"

Theudebald stared blankly at the man for a moment. "Think you," he said at last, his voice subdued with a mysterious intensity, "that a beast without flesh and blood could splinter a boat, and slay every man-jack aboard? Think you it would send the waves all a-choppy as that creature did? Think you it would rumble in its throat if it had none, or cast a shadow, or...? Nay, aged father, you err. That brute was as much flesh and blood as any man-jack, and with less of the devil in him." He looked down upon the dead form of his brother with a deep frown and darkened expression. "He...he was a good brother. He did not have to die! I will slay that monster!"

"But coz, you speak utter folly! Even could you slay that...that...thing, you could never hope to find it. The sea is a great and wide place, and sea serpents, if the tales are true (which I doubted until today) are seen but seldom. You've as much chance of finding a book of logic in a princess' bower, as finding this same serpent."

Theudebald recovered somewhat and wrung his beard in agitation, which had the double benefit of looking distraught and wringing out seawater. "Your point is a good one." He began to pace down the beach with his big hands clasped behind him. Alphonse followed, finding it harder to keep up with his furious muttering than to keep up with the great strides.

"I can never avenge my brother," he heard Theudebald say. "I am again a failure!" Mumbled sentences and hushed exclamations slurred together. Alphonse heard, however, something like "if there's one there'll be others" and "'tis a big world" and "I'll make a name for myself." He was starting to fear his strange cousin had, at last, lost all reason.

Theudebald stopped abruptly and turned to stare at the sea. The sun was setting, and the fading light shimmered like living gold on the calming waters. Villagers were combing the beach, and weeping around the remains of their fisherman fathers. The hint of a grim gleam in Theudebald's mad eyes made Alphonse's heart sink.

“What goes on in that head of yours, Theudebald?” he queried querulously,²³ but Theudebald ignored him. Just as Alphonse was about to speak again, his cousin burst out in a gruff voice, so abrupt it made Alphonse jump.

“I’ll do it! Not only will I get vengeance for what was done my brother by this beast, but I will make me a good name. No more will noble folk laugh at the sound of my name, but they will delight to hear it. And jongleurs will make songs about *me*, I shouldn’t be surprised. They’ll talk of me like Siegfried of old!”

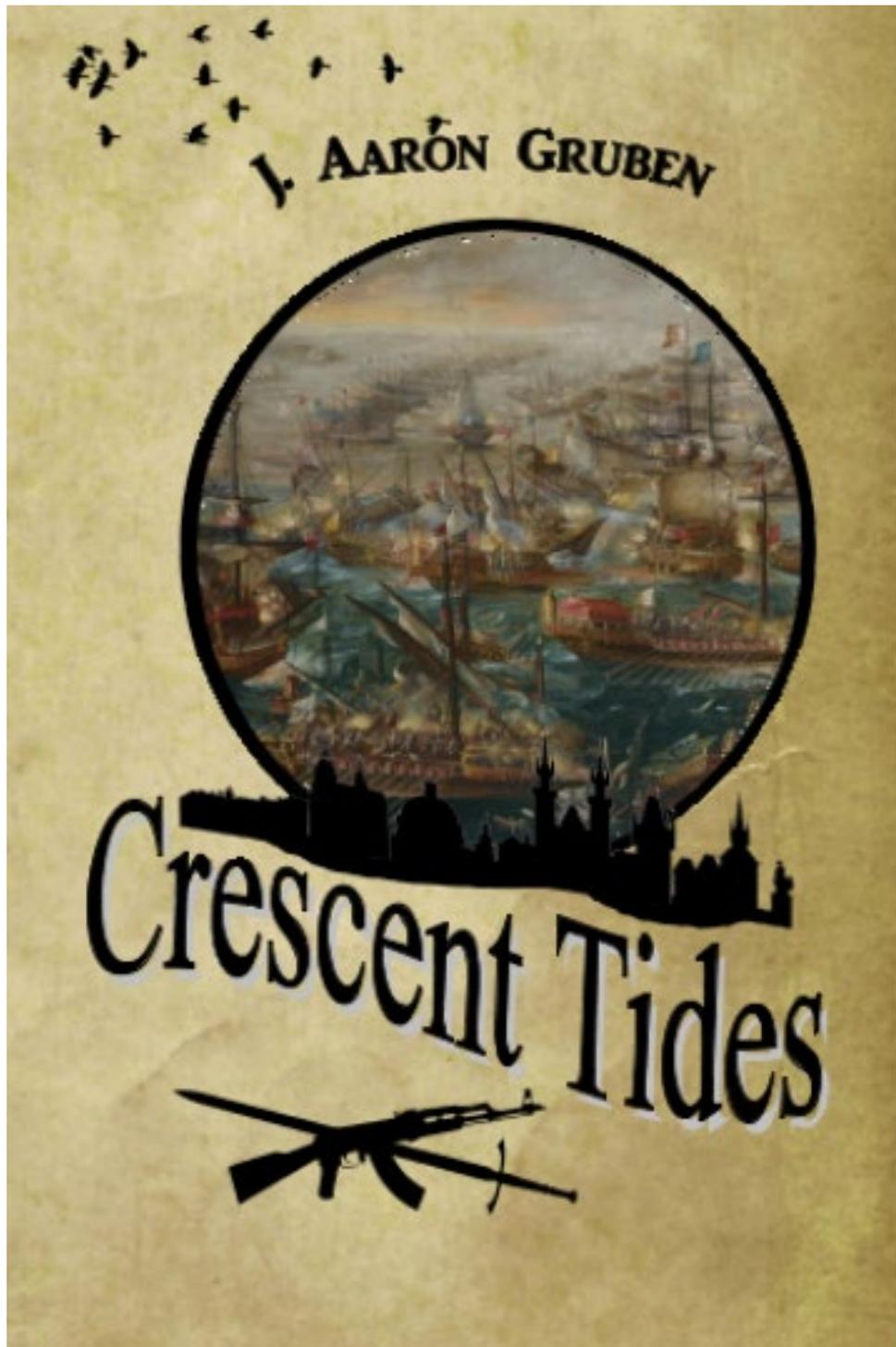
“What thought’s in that head, Theudebald?” Alphonse queried the question, now more concerned than ever. Theudebald turned sharply. A look of absolute determination almost bathed him: as if what he were about to say was a matter of fact and not a resolution he had just made.

“Today I change careers. I shall henceforth be a dragon slayer!”

And with that, Theudebald of L’fishe turned and stalked down the beach, leaving his cousin aghast and agape (as the old fisherman would have said) in the fading light. Visions of his mad cousin, all vestige of respectability lost completely, roaming the woods in search of mythical monsters flooded his head.

“Are...are there really enough dragons to make a career?” was all he could think to quoth at the fading form.

²³ Alphonse would sometimes query as well as quoth. He seldom ever simply asked. That would be far too bland a thing for him.



Crescent Tides

1.

“Time is free, but it’s priceless. You can’t own it, but you can use it. You can’t keep it, but you can spend it. Once you’ve lost it you can never get it back.”

~Harvey MacKay

Breathe. Calvin Schmitt exhaled softly and inspected his right hand for the third time that morning. He needed to ensure himself it was not trembling.

Steady yourself.

He paused a moment more outside the door, squeezed his eyelids tight, and tried to repress images of the horrors that might wait for him in the room beyond. A low snarl emerged from the beast on the other side of the door. He turned the knob.

Just breathe.

Cal buried his fear as he had done a thousand times and stepped into the room. A little, aged lady glared at him. A “teacup” poodle—that would certainly not have fit in any teacup Cal had ever seen—glared with her, and bared his tiny fangs.

“Good morning Dr. Schmitt,” the lady intoned with an icy edge to her voice. “I was expecting Dr. Hanberg.”

Dr. Calvin Schmitt put on his most winning, very fake, and rather frozen grin as he began his exam. About twenty minutes later, he answered the elderly woman’s last doubtful question and handed her a vial of pills. “Mrs. Brown, Mr. Snuffles needs one of these white pills by mouth twice daily,” he said in monotone. The obese, ancient poodle glowered from under immaculately groomed curls, a piece of Dr. Schmitt’s scrub tops between his sharp little teeth.

“Oh I can’t do that, Doctor,” Mrs. Brown interrupted. “Mr. Snuffles doesn’t take pills. He prefers a liquid. Can’t you get me a liquid?” Dr. Schmitt desperately tried to conceive a nice way to say *lady, your dog is fat as a slug*.

“Well, Mrs. Brown, Mr. Snuffle’s body weight unfortunately makes it necessary to give him tablets. He will have to learn how to take tablets just for a few days, so that he can get better.”

Mrs. Brown blinked in silent thought for a second. Mr. Snuffles growled again. Mrs. Brown continued. “I need to see Dr. Hanberg. She always saw Mr. Snuffles before and…”

A blonde girl in polka dot scrubs stuck her head in the door at that instant. “Dr. Schmitt, Myra Furber is on the line and says Little Bear is having a seizure. Can you talk to her?”

Calvin nodded and retreated in abrupt haste from the dread Mr. Snuffles. “Sure. Excuse me, Mrs. Brown but I have to go. Autumn here will show you how to give Mr. Snuffles his pills.” Autumn gave him a nasty look as he brushed past her into the hallway and toward the busily churning bowels of Animal Haven Veterinary Clinic, his practice located in sunny Albuquerque, New Mexico. He checked his hands again. This had been an exciting career…once. But that particularly demanding species of *homo sapiens* (in the form of the worried pet owner) could often be terrifying. The medical decisions (from simple to quite literal life-and-death choices) had long ago moved beyond stressful, and even the slightest of them might bring a board complaint or a lawsuit at any time. In short, the years of ulcers wrought by the constant queue of medical decisions had taken most of the joy out of his work. That is what Dr. Schmitt would have thought, had he actually allowed himself time for introspection. However, personal time had been extremely rare for years.

A man in scrubs, a few years older than Cal, met him before he could get to the phone. “Dr. Schmitt, you’re late to go

see Mr. bin Ghazi's horse. It takes 20 minutes to drive out there. I've got everything ready..."

"Give me a second," Cal called as he reached the office.

"Dr. Schmitt," said the secretary, "Dr. Hanberg called to say she can't come in today, and Mr. Page is angry that her puppy is still itchy, and two exam rooms are ready for you."

Calvin Schmitt silently held up a hand and picked up the phone, still on his original mission to speak to Little Bear's owner, whats-her-name... After a long five minutes, he hung up, rushed to empty the exam rooms as quickly as he could, then headed down the hall to gather his stethoscope and leave for the farm call. He passed Mrs. Brown still arguing heatedly with Autumn on the way. He resisted a sudden (but not altogether uncommon) urge to stop off in the closet and sob by himself in the corner before continuing to the back of the clinic.

"Your box is loaded, Doc. I'm coming with?" Fred Kawalkovitch was perhaps the most efficient vet tech Calvin Schmitt had worked with in his five-year career, and the veterinarian smiled in spite of his fluster.

"Yeah, Fred, let's go."

A few minutes later, they were in the truck on their way out of town. The clinic was on the south side of the city and it was only a few minutes before traffic gave way to rolling hills and desert shrubs. A strip of farmlands and trees, startling in contrast to the surrounding brown of the desert, appeared along the Rio Grande River ahead. Calvin Schmitt sighed. His mind was frazzled. He wondered how red his eyes were after his two emergency calls after midnight last night. At least the farm calls were a chance to get out of the office and spend a little time on the road. It was on farm calls that he almost—almost—remembered when he had a life. But the drive was also a chance to run through the case he was about to see.

"I put the lime in the coconut and shook it all up! I put the lime in the..." Fred was singing to himself softly in the passenger side of the truck. Cal glared at him as a matter of form, though he realized deep down that a bit of goofiness was perhaps one of the best ways to unwind taut nerves.

"So... Fred, this is a colic?"

"Yeah Doc, the owner said it was pretty bad. The owner is actually—"

The cell phone went off. Cal inadvisably lifted one hand from the wheel. "Dr. Schmitt," he said as he pushed the dreaded green button to accept the call.

"Cal? Hey, this is Sara Perez, from school."

"Sara! Hi...uh, good to hear from you again," he groped for something deep in the labyrinthine sulci of his brain.

"Are you still planning on meeting me for lunch today?" Oh yeah, that was it.

"Uh... That's right... I mean, of course! But... I'm running a little late today. I'm on my way to look at a colicking horse right now. Don't suppose we can get lunch after that?"

"That's fine," she replied, though her tone indicated otherwise. "Hey, you know, it's been a long time since I did any equine medicine..."

"Oh! Well, I mean, if you want to tag along... I'm out of the city, but..." Fred rolled his eyes and pointed at his watch. Cal shrugged helplessly; he had always had trouble saying no.

"Sure!" she sounded genuinely enthusiastic. "I can meet you. I'm actually in Los Lunas at Starbucks right now, is that anywhere near you?"

"Yeah, that's on the way," Cal admitted.

It was only a short stop, and soon Dr. Sara Perez had been crammed into the truck and they were on their way again.

They spent most of the trip with re-acquaintance. Calvin had run into Dr. Perez at the occasional conference, but otherwise had not kept up much in the five years since they attended vet school together. He remembered her as about the most ultra-liberal, Starbucks-sipping, tree-hugging, NPR fan he had ever known. And it appeared she had not changed. She was in town for a weekend conference on acupuncture and herbal therapy for laboratory animals, had already been to the UNM campus to hear an atheist debate, and had taken part in a rally against the oppression of women in academia.

“You haven’t changed a bit, Sara.” Dr. Schmitt risked speaking his thoughts aloud.

“Well you’ve changed,” Sara fingered Cal’s arm a bit flirtatiously and slapped him on the shoulder. “These farm calls have been good for you, Calvin Schmitt!”

“Er... Thanks,” he mumbled awkwardly. Though he wore a long-sleeved black shirt, he still felt the need to adjust it over his biceps (which, to be fair, had been considerably developed from their atrophy during his time idly glued to a desk at vet school). “It sounds like you’ve been busy.”

“Yes indeed! How about you, Cal, have you been busy?”

“Ha! Haha!” The laugh started small, but it grew in seconds to a downright maniacal guffaw that he could not stop. “HAHAHAHA! HOO! HOO! HEEEHHEHEE! HAAHAHAAA!!!!”

Dr. Schmitt snickered to himself and wiped tears from his eyes, oblivious of a sudden, awkward silence in the truck.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Dr. Perez whispered, scooting just a bit away from Cal.

“Um... Yeah,” agreed Fred. “We need to get you some time off, Doc.”

“Hmm?” said the half-sane and overwrought doctor.

“We’re getting close to our turn I think,” Fred Kawalkovitch noted, tactfully changing the subject.

“Yep. Manzana Avenue?” Cal turned the truck off onto the dirt road flanked by expensive adobe houses.

“Number 1345,” Fred nodded.

“It’s a colic, you said?” asked Sara. The two men answered in the affirmative. “How’s the owner with horses? Will he know what to do?”

“Well... Hmmm. I don’t know. What do you have on the owner, Fred?”

Fred chuckled, flipping through a battered medical record. “Farid bin Ghazi. I remember this guy. He’s a nut. He’s the one who made a big deal about his dog’s age.”

“Dog’s age?” Sara questioned.

“Yep. We neutered his dog when he was five months old, and he brought him in a few months later, wondering if Doc could look at his teeth and tell how many weeks he’d aged.”

“Did you say weeks?” Dr. Perez laughed.

“Yeah! Quiet, serious guy... but a weird dude,” agreed Calvin.

“You’re one to talk,” muttered Sara Perez, but Dr. Schmitt did not hear.

“He’s a smart weird guy,” said Fred, peering at the file. “He wrote here that his occupation is ‘Physicist.’”

They turned a corner and number 1345 came into view. “And evidently he’s a rich weird guy too.” Sara leaned forward to get a better look.

An insanely large adobe mansion sat back from the driveway, surrounded by extensive grounds. A huge fence barred the way in, crowned with loops of razor wire and warning signs plastered all over it. The adobe building looked somehow more formidable than most; perhaps it was the crenellations that crowned it, and the tower that jutted up from its east end. Several

large, expensive barns sat around the house, like massive guardians around a king. Immaculate pipe fences and corrals met their eyes, filled with beautiful horses who stared at them as they stopped the truck.

“Are you sure this is the place?” Cal asked as he gazed at the smoke coming out of a chimney built into one of the barns. Why a chimney on a barn, and why burn a fire in this weather? With a wry chuckle he reflected that he seemed to attract the clients that acted about as crazy as he felt.

“Yep,” Fred interrupted Cal’s reverie, and they stared in silence during the lengthy trek up the foreboding driveway to the strange looking mansion.

2.

“What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.”

~St. Augustine

Dr. Farid bin Ghazi met them at the door. He was a thin and short man, of Middle Eastern descent, and the little hair he still had was jet black and stuck out everywhere in a wild tussle. He sported a graying beard and trim mustache. His eyes sat behind dark sunglasses that he never took off. His feet were shod in sandals—Chacos by the look of them.

“Horse? What horse?” he asked when they told him why they had intruded on his domain. “Oh! That horse! Forgive me; I was...er, distracted. Yes... I think he’s dying. My horses are my life! You should have a look at him. My men...er, ranch-hands...are trying to calm him down and cut him from the herd right now. Why don’t you set up your equipment in the barn?”

Calvin Schmitt thanked his client, and the band retrieved their stuff from the truck. They stopped by the corrals on the way and found a crew of about a dozen men working with a herd of high-strung Arabian stallions.

“They’re beauties,” exclaimed Sara. It was true, they were magnificent horses. The colicky stallion paced back and forth, sweating, neighing, and pawing at his belly. He was not rolling yet (a good sign), and was feeling well enough to evade all the efforts of the men trying to catch him. It would still be a few minutes before they had him corralled for an exam. Cal did not want to be racist, but he could not help thinking that most of the crew could have been Farid bin Ghazi’s nephews. Over half were young, dark men with jet-black hair and an “Arabian” look. Although one very large black guy was among them, and also several rough looking white guys covered in tattoos.

“Hmm... Looks like this could take a while, and we’ll need some major sedatives for that horse. Let’s get set up,” Cal said, and they headed to the nearest barn.

“You put the lime in the coconut and shook it all up? I said, Doctor! Is there nothing I can take? I said, Doctor!!!!” Fred was singing to himself as they walked, and Sara and Cal looked at him. “Stupid song is really stuck in my head,” Fred explained apologetically.

The barn was quite a sight. It was the one with the chimney, and Cal noticed the smoke coming from it was unusually white and sent out a strange, acrid smell. An enormous steel thing jutted off the chimney, like some sort of gargantuan

lightning rod, and it stuck up what must have been 50 feet above the roof. The infrastructure looked like it must have cost a fortune—and it was almost as fancy on the inside as it was on the outside.

Cal strode to a dark corner of the barn and opened up his box. He brought out a stomach pump and NG tube, and started to fill a syringe from a vial of a xylazine and ketamine cocktail he had mixed previously.

“Look at those stalls,” Fred exclaimed, obviously impressed. “And the tack room... Wow!”

Dr. Perez looked too, opening the door with little concern for snooping.

“Sheesh! Looks like it should be in *Horseman’s Magazine* or something—minus that ugly medieval picture.” Fred walked further into the tack room and peered at a framed painting of a naval battle involving war galleys. “Sort of strange to have a picture in a horse barn.”

Dr. Schmitt put the syringe in his pocket and poked his head in. “All right you two, we shouldn’t be poking around someone else’s—Wow! That is a nice tack room. And he’s got a picture of Lepanto in here. What a weird guy!”

“Lepanto?”

“Yeah, it was a naval battle between the Ottoman Turks and a league of Christian forces. 1571 I think... In fact, what day is it?”

“October 7th,” replied the ever-informative Fred.

“Ha! If I remember right, the battle of Lepanto happened on this day. But I have no idea what it has to do with a tack room.”

“Hey, I remember you were a history buff at school, Cal. You even wrote some stuff about the crusades or something, right?”

“Sure enough,” he went back to getting his gear ready.

“I was listening to an interview with Karen Wibbly on *Most Things Considered* the other day. She wrote that book about the crusades that everyone’s reading these days. Man! What an awful time. I can see why they called it the Dark Ages...”

Her words faded in Cal’s ears at the recollection of a hobby he had not thought about for years. At one time he’d had a passion for reading about (and even writing about) medieval history. But now he always seemed to fall into exhausted sleep in the few moments he had for reading after work. He sighed. There had been days when he had not always been so busy. After the stress and intensity of vet school, he had looked forward to a quiet eight-to-five job. However, soon after he was hired the practice expanded, his boss relied on him further, and more and more people needed him. He had gotten involved in some volunteer work with a civic organization, and that (plus a few other activities) took up any spare time he had left. To add to the stress of his busy life, he felt more pressure on the home front. His parents had been bugging him with increasing frequency to get a life: more specifically to get a wife. It was plain they were getting desperate for some grandchildren. He would be 32 this year actually, and it could not be denied... he felt old already. Actually, he was seeing a girl. Or perhaps “was supposed to” would be the better way to phrase that. He had gotten too busy even for her, and could barely find time to answer an email. Truthfully, it did not look hopeful. Cal felt plain worn down by life in general, and tired of fighting. A point had come when he had stared it all in the face, and whimpered a resignation... *If work wants me, let it take me.*

“It’s hard to fathom such religious bigotry as...” Sara was still chattering when Cal flashed out of his few seconds’ reverie.

“Now Fred, don’t go taking things off racks. This isn’t a place to be snooping,” Dr. Schmitt admonished. Fred was not listening apparently. The tech picked up an immaculately embossed halter from a peg on the wall to admire it, but found it stuck. He pulled.

It had never occurred to Cal Schmitt that one small tug on a bit of tack would change his life. But that is undeniably the way things turned out.

Not knowing this at the time though, Cal could only stare as, with a sudden soft rumbling in the ground and a grinding sound, the whole back wall of Dr. Farid bin Ghazi's tack room opened up like a garage door. Three jaws fell open, and Cal and his companions stood in silence, peering at the dimly lit room beyond.

"Um... That's odd," Cal finally said hoarsely.

Fred said nothing, but walked determinately through the hidden door into the room beyond. "Fred! Come back here!" Cal was about to say, but Fred's slow, low whistle came first.

"Get in here and look at this, Doc!" he exclaimed in a high whisper. Cal looked nervously over his shoulder. He had a very bad feeling about all this.

The room inside was enormous. Bare steel support beams lined the walls and reached up, like rafters in an ugly cathedral, to disappear into darkness far above their heads. The left wall was entirely filled with what looked like some huge control panel, a dazzling plethora of little buttons and slides and knobs—like the soundboard at Cal's church times ten. A pair of sleek looking computers topped off the display. A large whiteboard took up most of the right wall, almost every inch covered in wild looking math equations. Calculus and statistics symbols brought bad memories of long nights and homework headaches from Cal's school days. The room only had one lamp, but there was also lighting from a...a thing. None of the intruders knew what it was.

This thing took up most of the room. A big platform with a few wooden steps was raised about a yard off the ground in the center of the room. Thick bundles of electrical wires snaked from the base of this to the bank of dials and computers along the wall. A circular disc, some eight feet in diameter, protruded only a few inches from the floor of the platform. The disc gleamed strangely and looked like it was made of some thick and heavy metal. Steam floated up in ghostly wisps from the disc, wrapping itself around two massive beams that stood up from each side of the platform. These beams arched along opposite side of the disc, and then angled inward toward one another some ten feet above the center of the disc—putting one in mind of a grotesquely large pair of insect mandibles rising up from a hole in the ground. They looked a little like steel... But it was the metal of the two beams that emitted the strange light in the room. They actually glowed blue, and a weird humming sound was coming from them, like the sound a halogen light bulb makes. A few arcs of blue sparks leaped across the small space between the ends of these glowing beams as they gazed at them.

"What is this thing?" Cal whispered.

"I have no idea," replied Fred. "But it is soooo cool!"

"You can't have it," Cal tried to joke, but followed with another insistence they leave.

Fred did not listen, his interest caught by the whiteboard. He walked over and squinted at the writing. Cal threw up his arms, but could not help walking around the humming doodad himself, which Sara had already been examining more closely. It was at this point that all three people in the room, when later attempting to reconstruct the account of their story, become a bit fuzzy about the precise sequence of events. Several critical things happened at once.

The veterinarian heard Fred muttering something rather excitedly about the equations on the whiteboard—something about time dilation and wormholes—but his attention was elsewhere. For the first time, Cal noticed the wall beside the door they had come in. Most of the wall was stacked with racks and shelves—all of them filled with weapons: AK-47's, Uzi pistols, slings of frag and gas grenades, what looked like a 50mm machine gun, boxes of ammo, grenade launchers, RPG's, a missile

launcher.

“We need to leave,” he insisted with quiet urgency, and started for the door.

“I think the humming sound is coming from this disc up here,” said Sara at the same time. She had wandered up the steps of the platform, and pointed excitedly. “Oh my! There are markings for a person’s feet in this metal.” Then she did a very stupid thing, but a very human thing. She set her feet on the markings. A hollow echo clanged through the room, a sound indicating empty space beneath the platform. “It is coming from the disc! I can feel a buzzing under my feet, as if something is moving very...” she looked around at the two men, but did a double take as she noticed the wall Cal had seen. “Are those guns?” Cal had a *very* bad feeling about all this, and leaped up the platform. He grabbed Sara by the arm to urge her toward the door.

“Here’s a light switch,” called Fred—at least, that was what Cal remembered him saying. It was at that point that the unthinkable happened. There was a click of the switch under Fred’s finger. Instantly the blue, glowing beams around the disc started a slow rotation. Blue and white bolts of electricity shot out of their apices from one tip to the other, like a huge Jacob’s Ladder. Sara screamed and clutched at Cal as a white light surrounded them both, and the steel pinchers suddenly accelerated to a dizzying rotation around them. A pop sounded, and the encircling light turned to a steady blue haze. All at once, Cal felt heavy, too heavy to move. The humming from under his feet increased to a reverberating, deafening pitch. As the ground shook, the light bulb in the lamp across the room popped out. And with terrible suddenness the odd apparatus, and the two people atop it, disappeared before Fred’s eyes into the ground in a hazy blue blur. A huge cracking noise split the air and all the lights went out, leaving Fred gasping in the dark. Doctors Cal Schmitt and Sara Perez were gone.



Book Two of the Tangled Eons Series

J. AARON GRUBEN

Fatal Fogs

Book 2 of the Tangled Eons Series

1



“It is much better to go on and fret, than to stop and fret.”

~Charles Dickens

June 9, 1865

The train sped toward destruction, belching a black cloud of smoke while its passengers chatted.

Men in first-class carriages, dressed in frock coats and top hats, flipped casually through their newspapers and sipped their drinks. Women chatted pleasantly about the hair-style advice from *The Young Ladies' Journal*, while they balanced their bell-shaped, crinoline skirts atop the long wooden benches.

The train sped toward destruction, while its passengers rested.

Tired mothers in the second-class carriages rested their heads against the rocking walls. Their wakeful children gazed in wonder through the dirty windows, at the lush fields of Kentish countryside rushing past.

The train sped toward destruction, while its passengers jotted notes.

One man in his 50s, with a bushy shock of a beard (which jutted from his chin over a starched collar and across a loudly patterned vest), was absorbed with a pen and notebook. A pretty young lady, poised with the straight posture one associates with expensive boarding schools and tight-laced corsets, laid her pale hand upon his arm. She pointed to a fox that stood beside a dry stream, and he glanced up from his writing (with a look of surprise to find a world existing outside his notebook) just in time to see the creature before they slipped quickly past. He smiled at her with a twinkle in his older eyes and a merry grin upon the lips that ran broadly between his long sideburns.

The train sped toward destruction, while its brakemen lounged.

The greasy fingers of a bored man, bedecked in the prim uniform of the South Eastern Main Line, flipped through a penny dreadful.

The train sped toward destruction, while its passengers tossed and fretted.

A lanky man in straight trousers and a faded, gray frock coat tried to nap fitfully. But thoughts of the woman he had left weeping in Folkestone mingled with thoughts of the pipe waiting for him in London. His craving smothered the guilt and kept him wakeful, wishing the train onward toward the smog-haloed metropolis.

The train sped toward destruction, while its conductor squinted at the track ahead.

The scenery sped by at 50 miles an hour as the conductor watched for danger. The newfangled railway used to be a horror to him as it had been to his father. But it was astonishing how comfortable one could become with the idea of sitting in front of a 100-ton tender carriage filled with blazing fire, shooting you and 115 passengers like a rocket across the British countryside.

The train sped toward destruction, while a child sang.

She sighed and laid a curly head upon her governess' breast, and crooned an eerie nursery rhyme her friends all sang.

*“Elsie’s got a ginger beer,
Edward drinks a flagon.
They must sip it silently,
Or wake the sleeping dragon.”*

The train sped toward destruction, while a workman with a red flag marched out to the tracks at the Headcorn Railway Station. A team of eight workers and a foreman were toiling at a broken section of tracks over a nearby viaduct: a small bridge spanning the Beult River. Their foreman, John Benge, had read the timetables (based on the Channel tides) and had assured them of an empty track to work on.

One... Two...

The man with the red flag counted telegraph poles to space flags (meant to warn any oncoming trains of the workmen ahead) so that trains would have 1,000 feet to stop before reaching the broken track.

The man in the flowered vest jotted down another note.

Three... Four...

The man in the faded, gray frock coat finally dozed off and drifted into another confusing dream.

Five... Six...

The little girl pulled idly at the frills on her governess' shawl, while the woman smiled down at her.

Seven... Eight...

A wrinkled gentleman in mutton chop sideburns and a tawny rim beard looked out from the woods of a country trail. His eyes glared with bitterness at the smoking abomination displacing the steady way of life his fathers and his father's fathers had known. The railway! Curse it!

Nine... Ten!

The workman stopped a second in his stride, suddenly aware of a faint rumble through the tracks. He looked up into the afternoon horizon in surprise and planted his flag.

It was not a second too soon. An engine appeared, roaring at frightening speed past the station. The man trotted beside the rails, waving at the approaching conductor and pointing to the red flag. He had counted the telegraph poles. The train had plenty of time to stop before it hit the broken line at the Beult Viaduct. What he did not know was the poles were spaced a smaller distance apart than the standard. He did not realize the flag he planted was 554 yards from the viaduct, not 1000 yards.

The conductor watched the station shoot past, then his eyes widened when he turned his head again to the track and saw the red warning flag. He swore and pulled a whistle to warn his three brake vans.

The brakemen yanked on their brakes.

There was a horrible jolt and a screaming of steel wheels as they strained against the rails. Sparks flew up across the tracks. Passengers were flung across the aisle. Men swore. Women screamed. Children cried.

The workmen at the viaduct looked up when they felt the coming rumble in the earth. Then they ran.

The conductor yelled, then grit his teeth and braced for impact. A gap in the rails ahead dropped into a wide, dry riverbed. That 10 feet down looked to him like a drop into the sulfurous depths of hell.

The train was still going something like 30 miles an hour when the engine shot across the ravine and slammed into the other side with the weight of the rest of the carriages behind it. A bone-jarring, earth-shaking, iron-rending jolt followed a feeling of stomach-wrenching weightlessness as the derailed train slammed into a dry riverbed 21 feet across.

Shrieks and wails and screams filled the once peaceful sky. Sparks flew and cinders burst. Tons of steel and iron carrying precious humanity smashed into bent wreckage.

The dust cleared, but the wailing did not. Blood stained the inside of the carriages. Men, women, and children lay wounded and bent. Some lay dying. Some were already dead.

The old man in the flowered vest did not give a second thought to the notebook the wreck had flung from his hands. He stood shakily up with a dazed feeling, as his mind tried to grasp the sudden vertical angle of his world and understand what had just happened. They were in a first-class carriage that had fallen only partway into the ravine. He helped up the young lady beside him and cupped her head in his hands, looking into her eyes.

"Ellen? Ellen? Are you hurt?"

"I...I think not," she murmured, checking herself. She turned to her mother and gasped in relief to find her alive.

He climbed through a broken window beside him, then helped Ellen and her mother through. They stepped out onto the edge of the viaduct and gaped down onto an awful scene.

The first-class carriages coupled in front of theirs were laying in piles like matchsticks across the riverbed. The mangled wreck of the engine and tender carriage smoked in front of them. A black plume of smoke billowed into the sky, like a sulfurous banner of death. Human bodies were strewn across the green grass among the debris.

Ellen put a gloved hand to her red lips. "God help them!"

"Yes. And I'll help them, too." The man in the flowered vest filled his hat with water from a puddle at his feet and went down to do what he could. He ground his teeth as he walked among the wreckage and stopped at the first man he found. He was dead. He moved on to find a woman still alive, but with a terrible gash over her arm, and an obviously broken leg. He cleaned the blood away and made a bandage from her torn shawl.

"M...Mary! Where's little Mary?" Her voice was faint but frantic. "She was sitting with me."

The older man looked in surprise at the place her shaking hand pointed to. He pulled up a burning sheet of wood and steel and bent down to look beneath the rubble. He turned away from the sight of a limp little hand with a shiver and squeezed his old eyes shut from a horrible sight he would carry to his grave. Tears trailed down the grime on his cheeks. He shook his head at the injured governess and tried to murmur comfort to her while she wailed pitifully. He carried her sobbing form up the riverbank, away from the wreck.

He went back and found a lanky man in a faded gray frock coat, propped in a sitting posture against a broken carriage rooftop, which now lay upon the blood-stained grass. The man was holding his head in his hands, and a thin line of crimson trickled down his fingers. He moaned softly.

"Ohhh... Oooh, what... Where am I? Who am I?"

The kind gentleman in the flowered vest kneeled and took the fellow's hand off his head to examine the gash. It was not deep but was already bruised and swollen. He wiped away the blood, before offering the wounded man a drink from a brandy flask.

The lanky fellow's flint eyes flicked upward. There was confusion written deeply in them, and that particular type of horror which comes when a man's whole life has flashed before him and left him feeling empty. A light of recognition flickered in the green eyes as they met the older man's.

He gulped down the brandy and coughed.

"Dickens? Charles... Dickens?"

The venerable gentleman in the flowered vest stood up and held out a hand to help the fellow to his feet. He nodded grimly.

"That is my name, sir. Let me help you out of this hellish wreck."

April 7, 1614

"KUDOC?²⁴ KUDOC? Do you copy?" A voice crackled, like a ghost with laryngitis, in sudden static and annoying volume inside Cal's ear. He dropped heavily behind a bulky wooden crate, which was set conveniently into the foul Chapel Lane mud just outside a dirty, half-timber house.

²⁴ Cryptonyms, code names used by intelligence agencies, usually start with a digraph: a two-letter designation for the place or organization of the code name. CIA code names usually use a "KU" digraph.

“Yes, I copy, Stan.”

Chilly darkness was descending upon the streets, and Dr. Calvin Schmitt had to squint at the twilight street to be sure nobody had seen him. He took off his felt-brimmed hat and repositioned the clunky earpiece it covered. A scowl disfigured his face as he straightened the tiny o above his left ear... An actual antenna! How ridiculous could the guys in the Tactical Equipment Division get? Surely if they had the technology to zap a man back to the Elizabethan Age, they should have moved far beyond stupid antennas! He turned a tiny knob to quiet the volume, before shifting the blinking headband apparatus and covering the whole thing up with his hat. It was better than bin Ghazi’s original translator masks, he had to admit.

“I copy,” he repeated.

“KUDOC, my call sign is KUSOARINGPIGEON.”

The static cleared a bit. He kind of missed it. It was sometimes preferable not to hear Stan’s voice.

“Um, yeah... I’m not saying that. We’re in 16th century Stratford, man! We don’t need call signs. Who could possibly pick up our signal?”

“I, er... You never know...” Stan sounded defensive.

Cal unstuck himself from the road with a sickly squelching sound and moved back toward the street. Mud and more mud! He had been covered in the stuff since he arrived at Stratford. This had to be the muddiest, grimmest century he had ever visited! The first thing he would do when he got home was take a week-long bath. “What do you want, *Stan*?” he whispered irritably as he walked quietly through the moonlit town. A massive edifice stood at the end of Chapel Lane: a three-story brick and timber domicile which could have housed an army. Cal set his boots toward it.

“The hummingbirds just fluttered.”

“What?”

A sigh sounded in the earpiece. “The family went upstairs, Cal. They’re going to bed.”

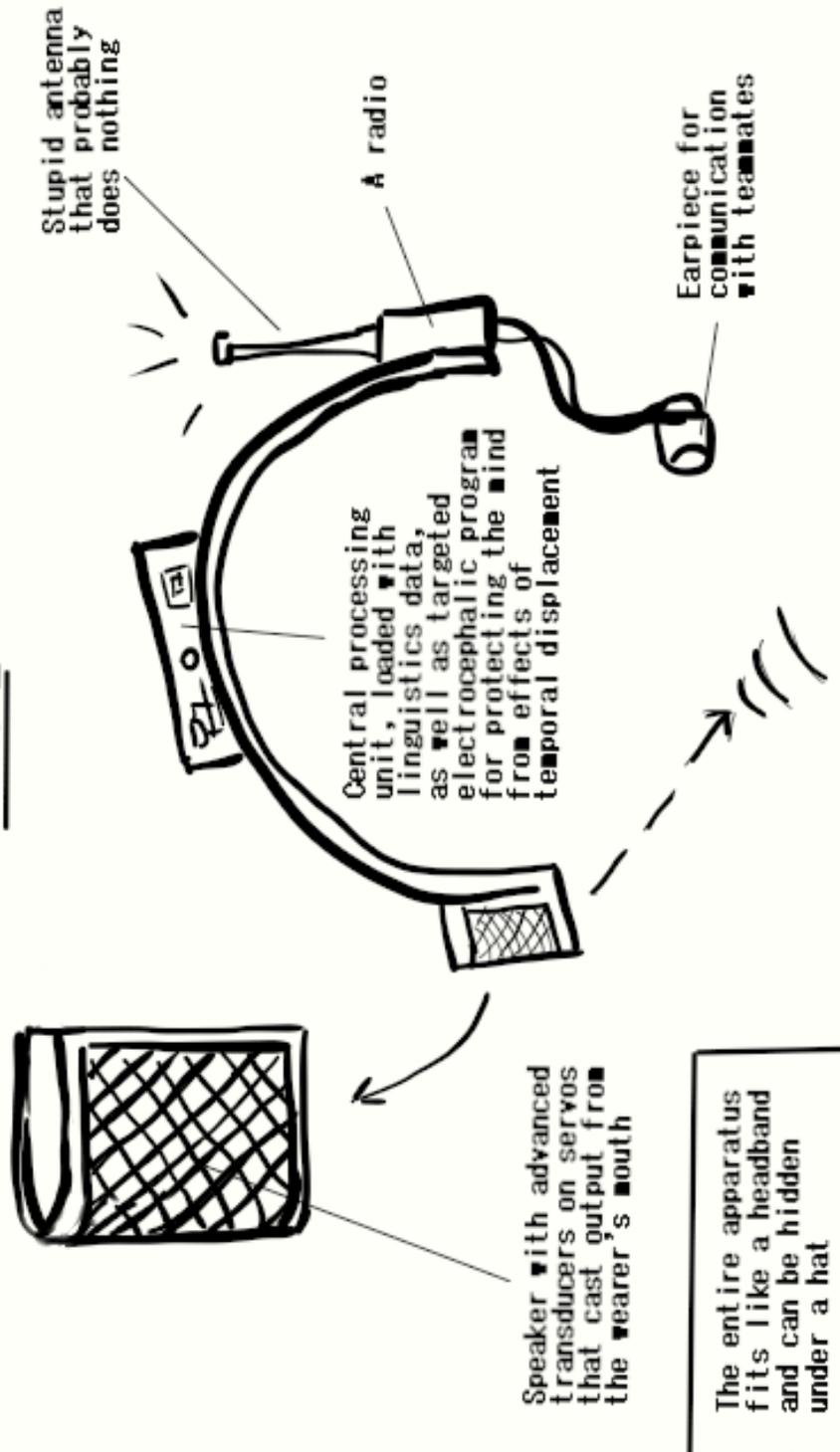
“Well, why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

There was a time in his life when breaking and entering would have never occurred to Calvin Schmitt as a possibility. But after the series of bizarre and deadly adventures he had experienced in the last couple of years, it seemed a ludicrously simple job. It was the work of a few minutes to sneak up to the large house, shimmy open a window, and crawl through.

Dr. Calvin Schmitt had seen a lot for a guy in his mid-30s. Though fit and well-endowed with muscles, he was not a particularly striking figure. He had a receding patch of sandy hair, which was 5 feet and 7 inches from the ground. He sometimes reminded others of a gorilla with his long, muscular forearms and stocky midriff. But among his colleagues, he was something of a legend.

Thunk! He dropped to the wooden floorboards as quietly as a cat. Well, as quietly as a cat in heavy, leather, mud-encrusted boots. Cal cringed and slipped off his boots before slinking down a dark hallway, his every sense alert. The house would be destroyed by an angry cleric in 1759 over an argument about gardening. That had made reliable floor plans difficult to find. Cal had to wing it, based solely on data in archaeological reports and observations from outside the building... And also just plain, old-fashioned tactical awareness and common sense (skills that had saved Cal’s life a number of times by now).

Translator mask Mark 2



This is a living room of some kind. He mentally tried to identify the rooms based on their furnishings as he passed through them. And that's a... What the heck is that thing? He stopped and stared at some kind of half-couch, with knobby legs and hideous faces carved all over it. Well, there's a table next to it with benches, so... A dining room?

He heard a noise and dropped flat on the floor behind the weird couch-ish object. A pair of servants walked around the corner. A wooden tongue stuck out at him from an ugly face on the unidentifiable article of furniture.

“Dretch me not, quaint mistress, nay! I'd grammery thine incarnadine lips 'gainst

mine with a lustihood thou'd reck foison, if I thought...” the bizarre speech faded as the man and woman passed the other room to disappear down the hallway. It still felt strange to hear real people actually talk like that!

Cal stood and crept ahead. “Talk to me, Shelly. What am I looking for?”

“You weren’t listening at our debriefing, were you, Dr. Schmitt?” Cal cringed at the obnoxiously critical tone in her voice. “Papers! You’re looking for a room with handwritten papers, obviously. Probably with a writing desk in it.”

“You could have just said, ‘look for papers, boss,’” he muttered irritably. A few minutes later, he found the room he was looking for. It was a little office, decorated with no other furniture than a writing desk, and lined with shelves. And it was packed like a library book sale with books and papers. Folios and quartos lined the shelves, and sheet upon sheet of handwritten scraps of paper teetered in obscenely massive, disorganized piles. “This could take a while,” Cal breathed. Then he got to work.

He shuffled through the first pile, picked up a page, and squinted at the indecipherable squiggles covering it. “I can’t understand two words of these scribbles!” he whispered into his headset.

“Of course you can’t. We’re looking for ‘Foul papers’ Dr. Schmitt, documents handwritten by the original writer. His script would be hurried and antiquated. Is there a way you could scan them all?”

He had to suppress the wry chuckle which tried to burst from him, lest he wake the house. “Nope. Not a chance.”

“Then look for the words *Cardenio* and the title *Love’s Labour Won*.”

The minutes ticked by into an hour, while he shuffled as quietly as he could through the old pages, gapping in utter silence at the illegible handwriting with a dimmed flashlight. It was tense work, with his ears strained the whole time for the least hint of sound outside the room. He expected any minute to hear boots hurrying toward the little room to investigate the shuffling sounds. He had to stop and hide twice while servants passed nearby.

I sort of miss the old days when missions were filled with simple stuff, like getting shot at by terrorists and stabbed at by spearmen. But even as the bitter thought came to him, he knew it was not true. A vision sailed across his mind’s eye, a flashback. Men impaled with spears beside him... Men bristling with arrows... Men moaning in their own blood on the ground... The heart-stopping rattle of machine gun fire... The terrible hiss of a javelin missile... The screams... He closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. When he opened them, his hands were shaking. He put them back to work shuffling papers to distract them from their tremors.

And suddenly, there it was. The word *Cardenio* was scrawled in the upper margin, writ in a flowing script on top of a page filled with scribbles. “I...I think I found it! *Cardenio*... It says *Cardenio*.”

“About time!” Shelly’s voice sounded in his earpiece. Any other teammate might have said, “Good job,” or “Great work,” but that wouldn’t be Shelly, would it? “Upload the image and I’ll confirm it.”

Cal reached into a leather pouch slung around his shoulder and fished out a small device. It was square and flat, and had a camera lens and an SD card slot...and another stupid antenna. A beam of light shone

from it in response to his tap, and he carefully scanned the beam over the old page.

About five minutes later, minutes that felt to Cal like hours, Shelly's voice came back into his ear. "That's it! That's the first page of *Cardenio*, one of the lost plays of William Shakespeare! I can't believe this!"

Cal cast a forlorn gaze at the fat stack of papers beneath the *Cardenio* page, and thought about the time it had taken to scan and transmit just one of them. "Yeah. I can't believe this either." He spent about four hours in that little room—crouched on the uncomfortable wooden floor where he could watch the doorway, scanning document after document, then searching for more.

Join TITO, they said! Travel through time and have adventures! It'll be exciting, they said...

He grumbled his way through the rest of *Cardenio*, and eventually found *Love's Labour Won*, which again turned out to be a massive pile of handwritten papers (instead of a handily book-bound quarto).

Of course, this really is exciting in its way, he admitted grudgingly. Just a few months ago, he would have been as thrilled by the papers he was handling now as a lover trembling over scented love notes. But his experiences—his *war* experiences—had changed him. A fluttering wish (one he was quite familiar with by this time) that he could go back to being the man he used to be, crossed like a shadow over his heart.

The moon had sunk low when a sound erupted across the night. Cal jumped and nearly dropped his scanner.

"Zounds! What passeth here?" A servant girl was standing in the doorway, staring at Cal. Her pretty mouth was agape, and she had dropped the bucket she held from her calloused hand.

"What's that?" Stan's voice sounded in Cal's ear.

"A girl's found me," Cal muttered. Then he flashed his most dapper smile at her. "'Tis alright, pretty lass...er... I'm a friend."

"Neutralize her, quick!" Stan crackled in his ear. "Do it quietly."

"Neutra... What?!" Cal stammered. The girl gaped at him still, too terrified yet to find words.

"Strangle her, or something," Stan's voice said in his ear. "I don't know. You've been on more ops than me."

"She's just a servant girl! I'm not strangling her!" Cal whispered hoarsely.

That did it. The maid was now fully convinced this home invader was also a madman, who talked to himself about strangling people. She found her voice, and morphed from a servant into an alarm bell with shocking swiftness. Her shout of warning to the household had enough volume to offend a banshee. "AIIIIYEEEE! Thief! Wastrel! Invader! We're beset! We're beset!"

Cal shoved his way past her, and dashed across the room beyond. Fortunately, the front door of the building was in the adjoining room. Wrenching it open, he shot out into the night. Voices were echoing

throughout the house behind him.

BLAM! An explosive sound rocked the night. It was an old blunderbuss, and Cal was heartily glad the things were hard to aim straight.

“Wait! Wait! You didn’t get the rest of the play! Go back! Go back!” Shelly shouted in Cal’s ear.

“Fiend! Mountebank! Curse you for a fulsome fopdoodle!” someone roared from the house behind him. They sounded close. He risked a glance back to see three burly men only yards away, each carrying big knives and heavy-looking clubs.

BLAM! The antiquated firearm went off again, and mud kicked up inches from him.

“I’m not going back!”

“You should have neutralized her,” Stan’s increasingly obnoxious voice sounded in his ear.

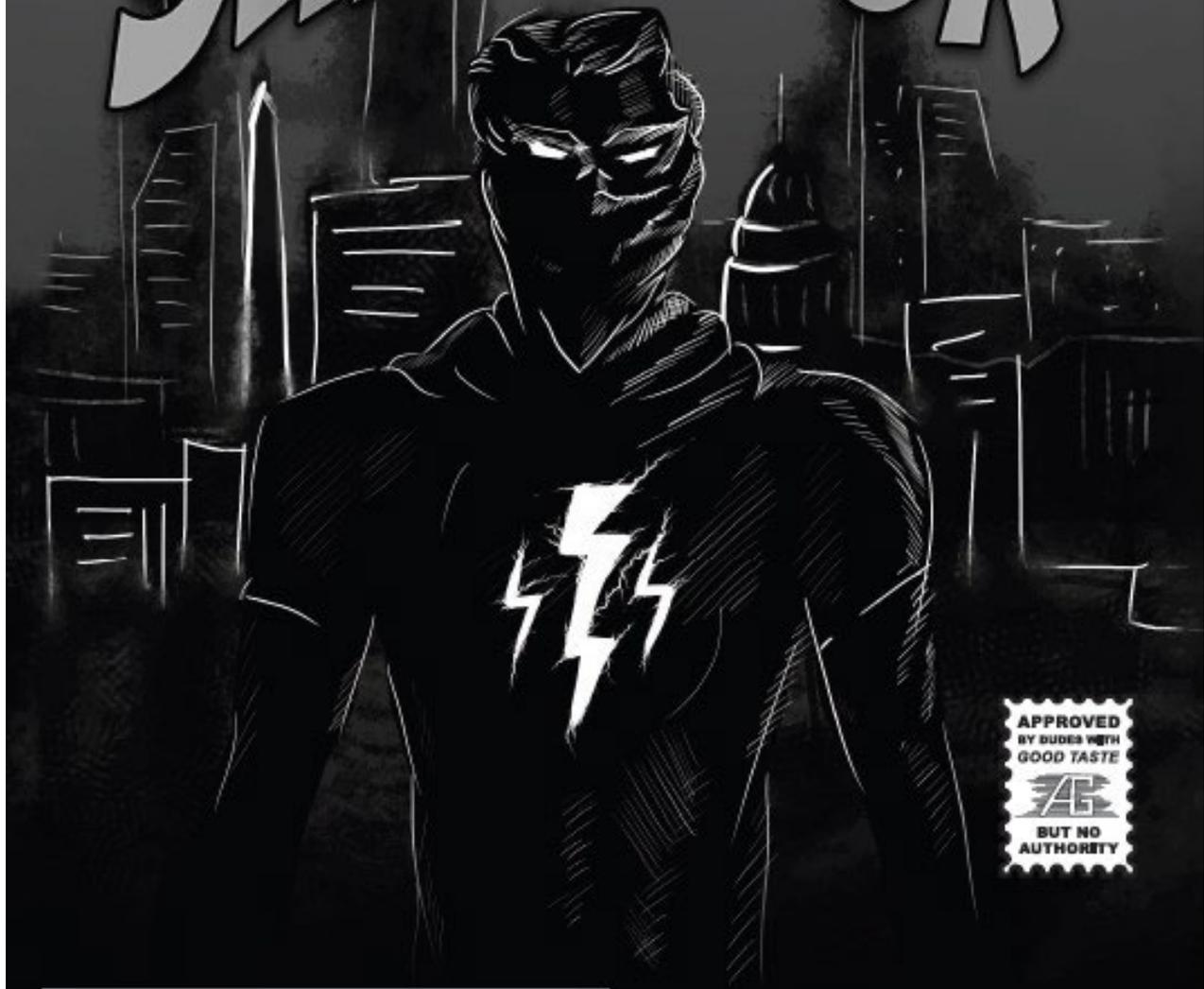
The half-timber houses seemed to crawl past Cal as he struggled in his stockinged feet through the mud of Chapel Lane toward Water Street, like a competitor inching through a ninja warrior course. The silver ribbon of the Avon shone before him in the moonlight. He leaped toward it, over the high bank, and into empty air.

He landed on a rubber boat. Shelly swore and almost toppled into the water. Stan cast off the mooring line. He started an outboard motor a few seconds later, and they went roaring into the moonlit Elizabethan landscape.

Shelly berated Cal and bemoaned the missing pages of *Love’s Labour Won* until sunlight bathed the Avon’s waters with sparkles. But Cal ignored her—he fell asleep long before the light came.

When the sun again set, they came at last (several minor adventures later) onto the Bristol Channel where their coworkers had punched a secret hole into the ocean.

THE STALWART SUPINATOR



**VOLUME 1:
SERVANT OF THE STREETS!**

J. AARON GRUBEN

GARRETT LARIMER

THE STALWART SUPINATOR: SERVANT OF THE STREETS!

1

The symptoms were not immediately apparent.

Looking back, he could see them coming. Just a few twinges of nausea, momentary feelings of passing disgust. It was hard to see then that beneath those feelings, disaster loomed.

Then it all erupted on a fateful October day.

Dr. Tom Charger was a newly graduated veterinarian working at a busy practice in Gunnison, Colorado. He was standing over an anesthetized sheepadoodle the moment his life turned sideways. It was a messy morning. The rebreathing bag for the anesthesia delivery system started leaking. A good doctor is a good problem solver, but Tom had always had a certain penchant for invention, even beyond the average. Some of his friends called him a “mechanical genius,” and joked he had built a baby rattle from a tongue depressor and a can of peppermints a mere 10 minutes after leaving the womb. It surprised some people to hear a doctor can have skills or interests other than medicine. Tom had several. He loved tinkering with things, reading history books, and studying theology. And fortunately, while he stood gloved and gowned, he was able to talk his technician through a makeshift repair of the anesthesia machine using duct tape and a trash bag.

But this was hardly the event that changed everything for Dr. Charger.

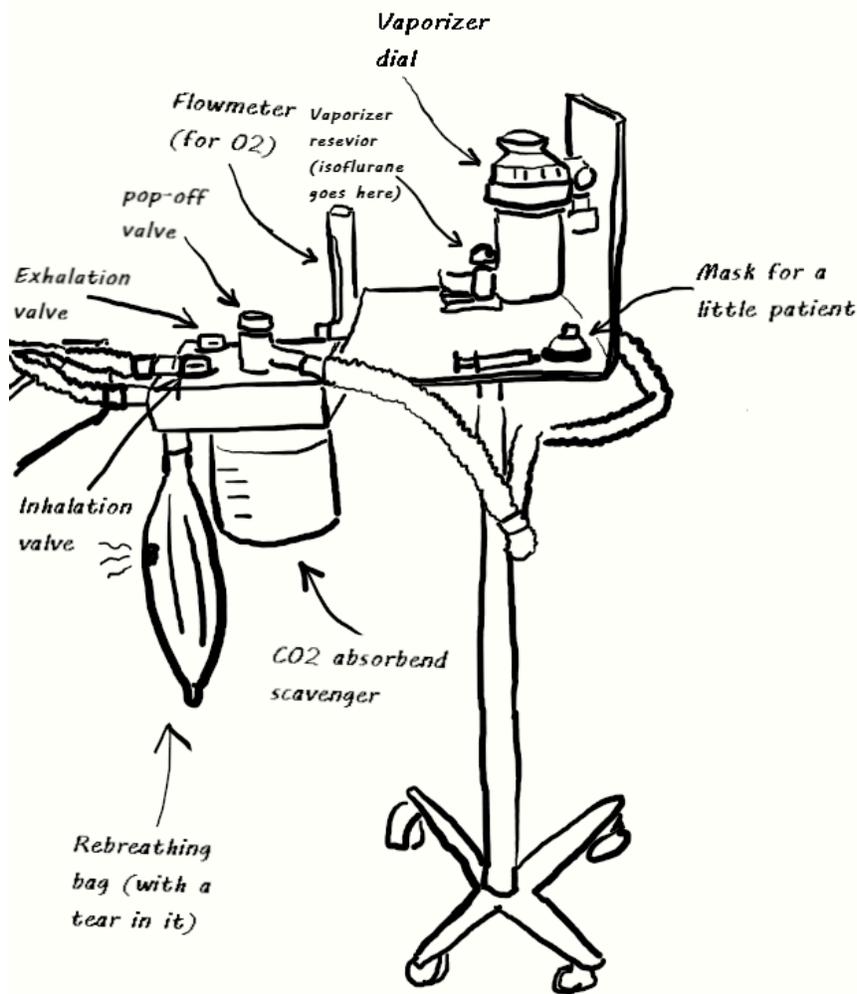
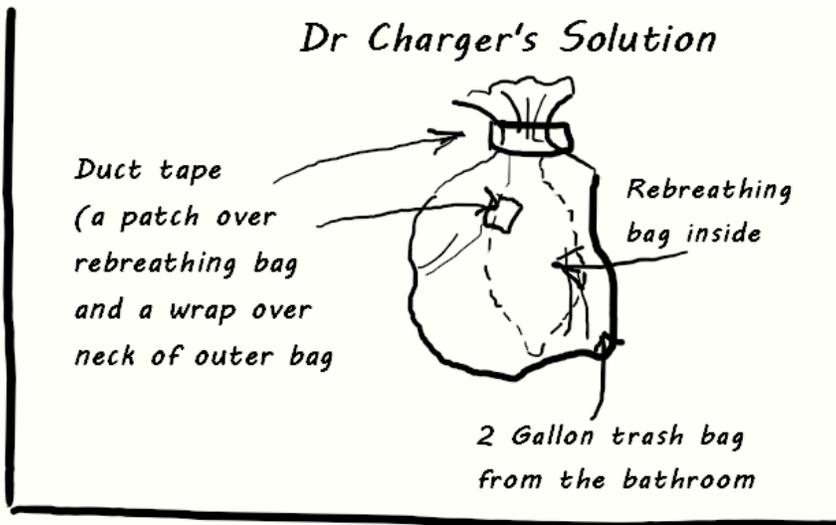
That event, the moment which really starts his story, happened about five minutes into the spay surgery. He made an incision a few centimeters caudal to the umbilicus, incised the linea alba, and pushed down some of

the greasy, yellow fat and wriggling loops of intestines just like he had done scads of times before. Blood oozed from tiny capillaries. Disaster loomed.

“Whew! It’s hot in here. Isn’t it hot in here?” he complained to his tech Clarice. She looked up, and a hint of worry fluttered across her face.

He fished for the teeny uterus with a spay hook and made to shove back the loop of the intestine that came writhing up from the incision instead (like a wet, fat worm). At that moment, an unfamiliar feeling hit with the force of a visceral sledgehammer. An enormous wave of nausea and discomfort blurred his concentration. He tried not to vomit into his mask as he stared down at the gooey mass of organs in his fingers. He swayed a little, barely hearing his surgery tech's rambling voice like an echo from another world.

“Dr. Charger? Dr. Charger? Are you OK?”



Tom Charger stumbled from the operating room.

“I...er...I need a minute.”

The next minute found him collapsed in a daze onto the floor. He had completely passed out.

Tom spent that afternoon at a human hospital. A slew of tests proved he was in peak physical health. The MD recommended he see a psychiatrist, and this was a bit more fruitful.

“Oh, yes, Tom,” the shrink addressed the veterinarian who lay in misery upon a couch in his immaculate office, “I have seen cases of acute disgust-related syndromes develop in

patients before. Disgust is a primal disease avoidance emotion, but it can be at the root of multiple

pathologies.” Tom did not like the thought of being riddled by “multiple pathologies” any more than he liked the other big, scary list of phobias and compulsive disorders the doc was rattling away. It was, in layman’s terms, an acute case of the heebie-jeebies. After years of work as a technician, more years of school than he cared to admit, and finally working as a vet, Dr. Tom Charger found he could not stand the sight of blood.

It was definitely a disaster for poor Tom: a complete upheaval of his life plans. Unfortunately for him, there are few jobs more disgusting than being a veterinarian. From poop to vomit, blood to CSF fluid, maggots to ascarids, and sticking one’s hands in every conceivable orifice, veterinary work is *really* revolting. Most vets get past this by trying not to think much about it. There is absolutely no future for a squeamish vet.

Tom’s job became unbearable over the next week, and he eventually turned in his notice. Thus, poor Tom Charger found himself out of work, lonely and bewildered about life.

Tom tended to be an optimistic guy. He was in his midish 30s, average in height, but lithe and muscular, owing to the fact that he liked to jog every other day and lifted fat textbooks and fatter Labradors. He was a nice looking guy (on the whole, and taking one thing with the other), with a square jaw, laughing green eyes, and a generous shock of sandy brown hair. His acquaintances thought of him as carefree and happy. But now he felt choked inside by anxiety and had serious doubts about any kind of future. He tried not to think about his \$290,000 of student loan debt. To make things worse, he felt unbearably lonely. After moving to Gunnison to be closer to his parents, they traipsed off on a six-week dream vacation to Europe. He could not go because of his job—which he had now quit. He had few friends in his new town and his siblings lived all over the country.

Tom Charger was lower than he’d ever been.

Unsure how to cope with the realization that he was a complete failure at the career he’d planned and sacrificed years to start, Tom threw his hands up and left it all. November found Dr. Tom Charger in his ancient Nissan Pathfinder. He did not have a plan. He did not even know where he was going other than “eastward” (because that sounded nice). This was, of course, a terrible idea: but the Almighty had His plans to make Tom Charger’s vagrant road trip into something astounding. He may well have had a twinkle in his eye when Tom started up the engine that day.

“Who knows, maybe I’ll come across a job I can actually do,” Tom thought as he rolled down the driveway.

He never suspected that a road trip arising from a personal disaster would prove to be a

metamorphosis—and how it would affect his mild-mannered (and weak-stomached) persona. However anxious and despairing Tom Charger became, he stubbornly remained an optimist, with an unusually wide-eyed view of the world. And as long as he kept that mindset, however uncertain his destiny, the promise of adventure along the way would be absolutely assured.

2

This was a *great* idea!” Tom fibbed merrily while he watched the glorious miles of pleasant highway slip by on a bright day. Cheery Celtic music blared, and the wind whipped gaily through Tom’s sandy hair from an open window. The miles of Kansas wheat fields seemed to beckon him to adventure, and he counted the cows with enthusiasm every time he passed grazing land.

“This was a *dumb* idea!” Tom moaned many hours later as he gazed forlornly out the window at the darkening landscape. Endless miles of highway slipped by. A storm was coming. It was too cold to keep the window down, and every time he tried to turn on the vent, his feet got chilled. His outdated phone was locking up and nearly out of batteries (and the charging port in his old SUV had long ago broken), so he turned in desperation to the radio.

“...*My pretty mamma likes to ski in the Bahamas, an’ drives in a pickup with some shaggy, shaggy llamas...*” blurted out a twangy country ballad.

“Next,” Tom pressed the scan button.

“...*RAR! RAAARRRR! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRG!*” someone (possibly possessed by a demon) screamed in evident agony, while a horde of angry drummers beat on things, and electric guitars screeching atonally.

“I think not,” Tom muttered and pressed the magic button.

“...*You really think Bush was telling the truth? You’re an idiot! You’re all alike,*” laughed Sally Cramfast, who was possibly the most obnoxious talk show host to ever inhabit an airwave.



Maybe I'll try the AM stations.....

"...You mean those UFO's really stole you away and took your nose?"

"Yessiree! And it weren't 'til four days later when they brung it back. Ain't never worked the same since!"

Sheesh! How absurd can these late shows get?
Next station.....

"I lost 80 pounds in only 3 days with Fat-be-Gone,™ and you can too!"

Side of effects may include

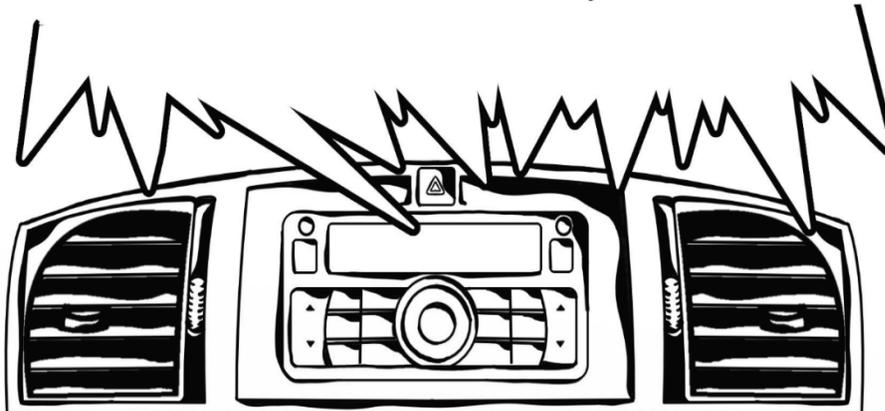
headache, nausea, siezures,

internal bleeding, loss of hair,

loss of your eyeballs, death, and..."

Next....

"... Ai! Ai! Ai! Queso es mejor a ti..."



Eatery at...well, the sale barn. That was it. Steak sounded pretty good, and even affordable there if he remembered correctly.

Soon the Nissan pulled into the dirt lot near a Kansas City sale barn. A complicated web of bullpens and cattle rails surrounded a little steakhouse. Tom had to walk past a truckload of reject cow parts and

Tom could not understand her widespread popularity. Maybe people just liked to hear someone scream at everybody with the nastiness they felt inside. He would not be one of her listeners.

"That's the best so far," Tom sighed, settling for some cheerful Mariachi tunes. As raindrops hit the windshield, he spotted a sign reading 23 miles to Kansas City. A few minutes later, the rain was falling so heavily it was hard to see the road. His stomach growled. Surely there was a place to eat. It seemed like his dad had a favorite food stop near here... Ah, yes! The Sale Barn

a pen of flatulent horses. His new queasiness surfaced, but he was too hungry to let that stop him. It was only an hour until closing time when he rushed through the door, but there were still a few other customers. A lanky cowboy with dusty chaps and a Stetson on a table in the corner sat sipping a cup of coffee. A pair of truck drivers sat at another table, forking away meat and potatoes. A rancher and his wife sat at a table near them.

“Howdy!” Tom addressed the young lady behind the register at the door. “Can I sit anywhere?”

“City boy, are you?” she queried with a smile.

“I guess. How did you know?”

“Not too many people actually say howdy around here. Yep. Sit anywhere you like. I’ll be right with you.” Tom walked by the truckers and sat down a table away from the rancher and his wife.

“Hi, there!” he greeted the two truck drivers as he passed.

“Howdy!” they chorused.

Tom grinned as he inched into his seat. This place had an atmosphere. It was the same waterin’ hole he recollected moseyin’ into as a young steer. A twinge of loneliness surfaced unexpectedly with the memory. He looked at the rancher and his wife at the next table and felt jealous. They said little, but you could tell they were enjoying each other’s company.

“What can I get you to drink, sir?” asked the waitress, suddenly at Tom’s elbow. He almost jumped, but recovered enough to ask for a Dr. Popper. “Sure thing. Here’s a menu and some silverware.”

Yum yum! Tom perused the list of offerings. He finally settled for a flat iron steak with a baked potato and put in his order.

“Ah! Nectar of the demigods!” he sighed as he gratefully took the proffered drink from the waitress. “This oughtta keep me up for a few more hours of driving.” She blinked at him for a minute.

“That was weird. Are you a poet?” she asked.

“No. But I do make some *awful* clever limericks.”

“Well, think of one for me while I get your order,” she laughed. Her pretty smile was motivating, and he got right to work. When she returned, Tom was ready to recite his limerick.

*“Once on a trip I did make,
Mine hunger attempted to slake,
I stopped at a barn
In Kansas anon,
And had me a fabulous steak!”*

“You were right, that was awful,” she giggled, placing a steaming plate of delicious steak and potatoes in front of him. “But not too bad for a city boy. Careful with the hot sauce. It’s got a real bite.”

“Thanks,” he said absently as he dripped sauce on the flat iron and chewed some. It was good. “Ouch!” Tom cried. “It bit me!”

“Told’ja it had a bite,” the waitress smiled.

Tom fingered his tongue gingerly and felt a small welt. Odd musings started in his head, fueled by his surroundings and his own quirky character.

“Bitten by a steak...” Biting his tongue was way less interesting, so his mind re-wrote what happened. “Bitten by a *radioactive* steak... A glowing muscle... There’s a story!”

Tom stared at his steak a while more before getting enough courage to try another piece. The meat behaved, so he polished it up. Soon he had finished the entire dinner and ambled to the register. He paid his bill, tipped the waitress well, and walked to the car with a full belly, a tingling tongue, and thoughts about radioactive protein molecules surging through his bloodstream.

Though he knew the thought was ridiculous, it had planted a mental seed in the fertile soil of Tom’s bored imagination. His mind’s eye was glowing a brilliant green. And a creative mind, inside an active body, has always had the power of shaping reality.

“This could be the first chapter of my superhero backstory!”

He got in the car and scooted back onto I-40 where the miles of empty highway stretched before him. He tried his luck surfing radio stations again.

“...And them aliens was ‘bout 10 feet tall. And none of them had noses! I think that was why they wanted mine.”

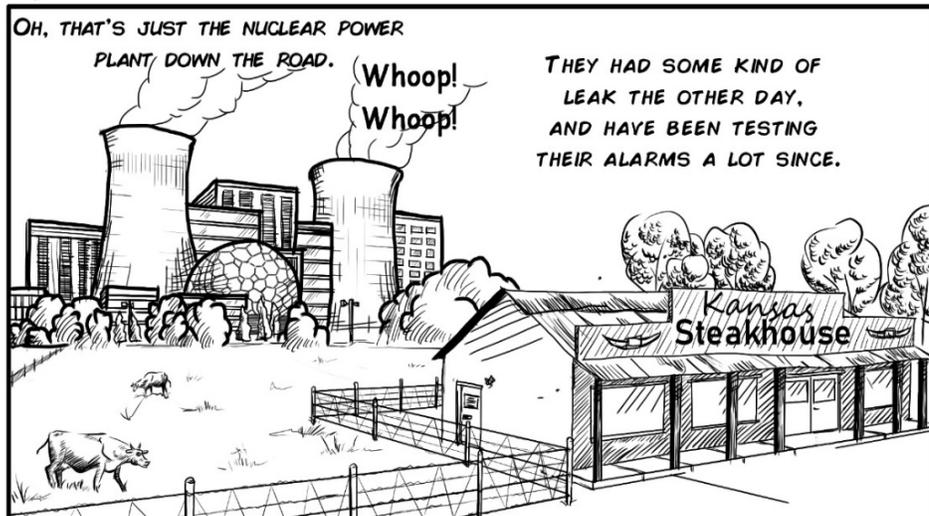
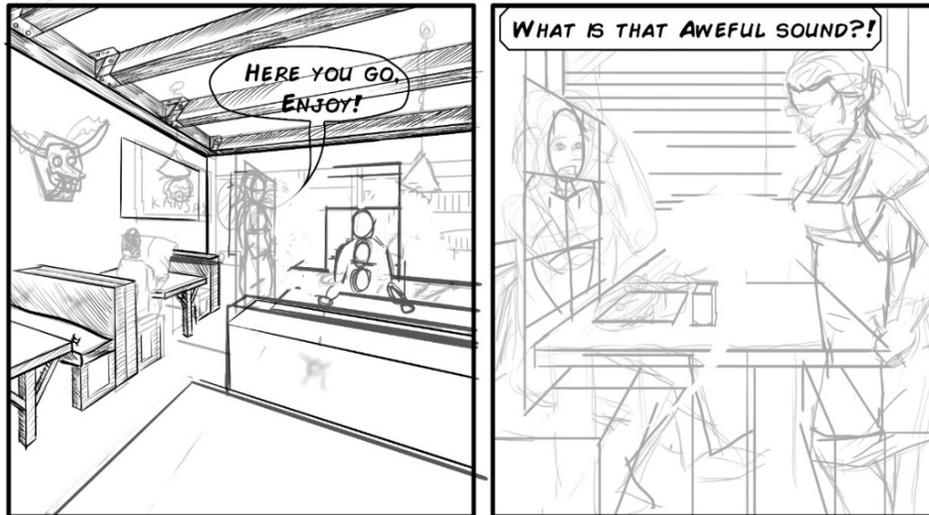
“Still at it, huh?” Tom grunted and changed stations.

“You want a fiscal policy with enough sang-froid to instigate an economic uprising?” rang out the grating voice of Sally Cramfast. *“Just look at Obama’s budget plans. Duh!!!!”*

“Hmm...” thought Tom as he switched the station again. “I honestly have no idea what that woman is saying.”

He finally settled on a local worship station, and his vehicle meandered its way over countless miles of Midwestern landscape. Well, they were counted miles, since they had mile marker signs. But Tom was barely awake enough to notice. The rainstorm had stopped by the time he finally pulled into a campground in Rocheport. It was the work of a few minutes to find a site and pitch his tent. Tom quickly tucked into his tattered army sleeping bag, putting a frilled Mexican blanket over that—it was

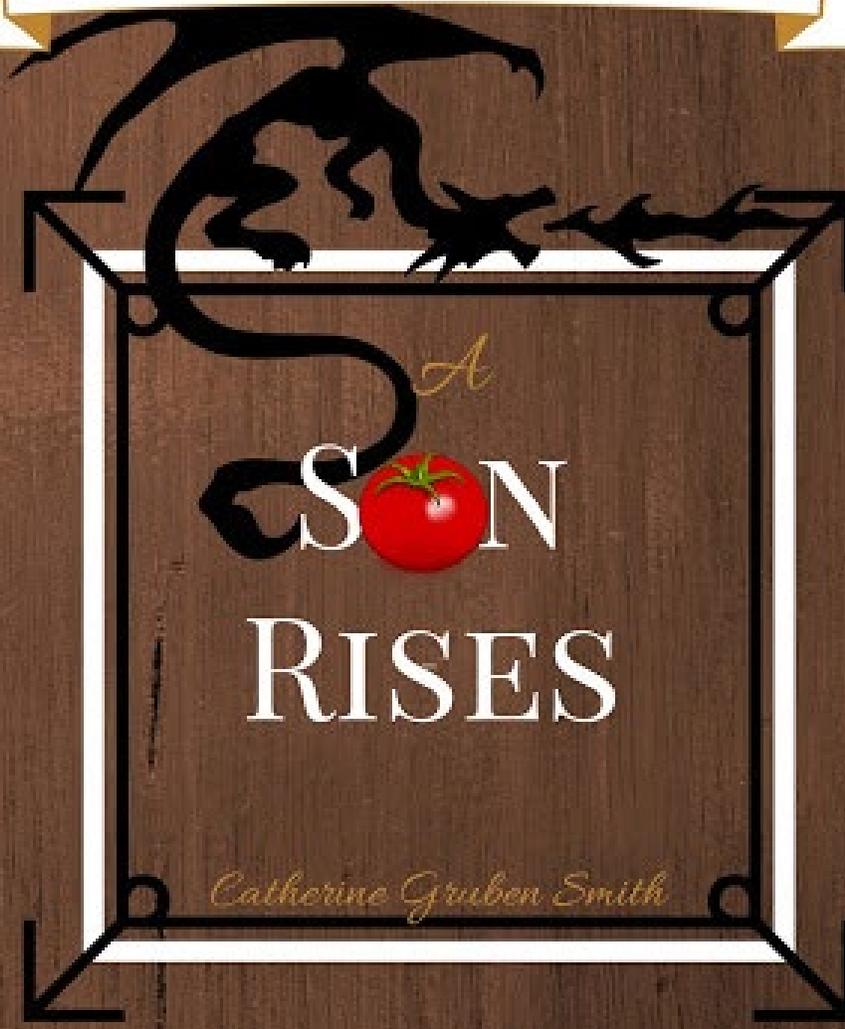
a favorite his parents had bought him in Juarez, and he always kept it in the car. Irradiated cattle and mutant steaks that bit people stampeded his dreams that night.



TOM'S OBT-OVERACTIVE IMAGINATION SUDDENLY WENT INTO OVERDRIVE....



Dreaded King



A
SON
RISES

Catherine Gruben Smith



VOLUME 1



Dreaded King: A Son Rises

CHAPTER 1: Concerning Mud, Fire, and Tomatoes

*"There is nothing better than a slightly burnt tomato." -Nenroot Hawley, from his book *How to Reclaim Food from the Ash Heap**

Charlie

I awoke to the pungent scent of frying tomatoes and dragon fire. There was no time to pinch back my joart²⁵ or even tie back my hair, I could already hear Mel's mighty bark heralding the danger. I leapt from my little bed and raced for the door, grabbing my things as I moved. This had become almost routine since the tomatoes had been yielding fruit, and I was well versed in the act of drawing on my old holey boots and jacket as I ran. The latch was lifted in a trice, the plank door swung open, and the bright morning sunlight flooded into the house, allowing me to see what I had to deal with. I knew from my dog's noise it would be trouble. But I had no real fear; nature had a method for any event, ill or good, and all I had to do was simply direct it.

My tomatoes were being hard hit. Four dragons wheeled above my little circular patches, their tails flicking about in anger and looking like six-foot snakes. The sunlight made their bright scales shimmer and gave them a particularly vile look. But not as vile to me as the row of freshly churned up mud and the missing wall of trees that had been at the Black²⁶ Forest when I went to bed five hours ago. It seemed the loggers had been hard at work in the moonlight. I didn't mind their harvesting the trees, but why did they have to leave such ugliness and destruction behind them? If only those of the Halfful Lumber Company would listen to my suggestions for sustainable harvesting! But it was a forlorn hope that any would ever listen to Charlie Bigton. At least they left me alone to tend my farm, with only occasional grumbles. The sound of a furious howl reminded

²⁵ An herb, tasty in eggs, hen meat, and soups. See the glossary if you wish to know more. Actually more information on any word you don't know can be found in the glossary. Unless stated otherwise, or I forgot to enter it there.

²⁶ This is a description, as the forest is black. But it is also a type of tree grown in that section of the Jaspur Region, and the name of the forest. (The Jaspur people tend to try to keep things simple, and the easiest name to hand was, "Black.")

me of the trouble at hand and I looked back at my little farm, a patch of green and beauty in the midst of all the mud and filth. Melawnwyn was heroically keeping the scaly brutes off the plants, his rich growling-bark rolling over the fields as he darted back and forth from one tomato patch to another. All I could see of his progress was a furrow in the plants wherever he ran, and I admit I laughed at my faithful helper. And immediately felt guilty over it.

“Keep at them, Mel the Mighty,” I called to make amends, beginning my race across the yard toward my trigger pole. “Your voice breeds fear in their cold-blooded hearts! Charlie is on the job. And remember, Harbal Tongly writes, *‘One day the short shall rule the world!’*” The dog growled louder as he heard me, and his speed was such that the furrows left by his passing began to swing closed almost as soon as they opened. I reached my pole and paused, studying the situation. This was my second good crop of tomatoes, and I had learned last year the fat red fruit brought on the dragons. They were persistently pestilential beasts, and I had lost all but three tomatoes to them last year. And my one room house had been set afire twice from their white-hot blasts. But this year I had planted my tomatoes in scattered, circular patches and placed sieves over them, hanging from a bit of piping I had stretched from my rain reservoir on the roof of my henhouse, allowing me to douse the dragons’ fire before it hit my plants. The operating mechanism was simple enough, a valve held back the water, opened by tugging a chain, which I had thoughtfully numbered so that I knew which chain went to which sieve. Though the numbers had been a later addition, after I had failed miserably eight times and soaked my faithful Mel instead of the scaly scavenging dragons. As I watched, a brilliantly green reptile spun about in midair, and I could see the glint in his eyes as he hunted for the barking dog that kept him from his juicy breakfast. His miserable fire sack began to fill.

“Steady, Mel,” I called, readying my trap. A line of crabtall²⁷ that my herald was racing through suddenly closed, all except one patch about two and a half feet long, where the dog stood still at my command. The dragon spotted it and swooped, the guttural gagging cough of a pre-fire breath sounding from him. “Ten, Mel!” I yelled,

²⁷ A tall blue stalk, with triangular black fruit. (Personally, I don’t think I would care for black fruit, as it would remind me of a black mold spore I was persuaded to study during my years at Yale, and the sad death of my favorite cockatoo due to the episode. Poor Kyle, never will I hear his sweet singing voice again!)

grabbing for the chain. The dog raced away, springing along the ground faster than the dragon's wings could take him. The pest saved the fire for when the dog was still again, as I knew he would, but kept up his gagging cough in order to keep it hot. I could see his fire sack bubbling and beginning to glow with the white heat of a dragon's wrath. A streak of red-orange shot out of the crabtall and into the midst of tomato patch Number Ten. Mel, mighty heart, spun around and faced the dragon, giving it the high-pitched howling bark he knew the beast hated. I jerked the chain down and heard the heartening gurgle of the rainwater pouring through. A stream of white-hot fire spewed from the dragon, driving him backward, his black wings pounding the air as he strove to stay in flight. As it left his throat, the water began to pour out of the pipe. Mel sidestepped with remarkable dexterity, his one good ear twitching at the furious hiss of the fire dissolving in midair.

"All praise to our timing, my boy!" I yelled ecstatically, noting not a single plant had been singed. And one of our foes was taken care of, he would be exhausted for the rest of the day now, and would seek a high tree where he could nap and regain the energy to blow out another fire breath. He gave a low moan as he fluttered weakly toward the dark forest fringing my little spot of green, and I jeered at him unapologetically. The dragon exhaled the cloud of smoke from his fire blast, and I noted the white smoke had a red tint in the light of the early morning sun, a color that made it seem very nefarious. But despite the scent of decaying plants and animals it left behind, there was nothing dangerous about dragon smoke. I knew it well, I had inhaled enough of it last year. Mel's growling challenges suddenly changed to an irate yapping, and I knew it was meant for me. I quickly turned my eyes from the defeated dragon and back to our still flying foes. One, a slim pest of deep green and average size, was flying hard on Mel's stubby tail through the cumbtlot²⁸ beds. My fellow soldier was heading toward patch Number Five, and I quickly fumbled for the chain.

"Alright, Mel, Charlie's on task again," I called, and he immediately went back to his barking growls at the dragons.

²⁸ I can see I am going to get very tired of making footnotes about foodstuffs and plants. I suggest a different method, I will make fewer of these boring footnotes to interrupt your reading, and you can turn to the glossary if your curiosity dictates it.

It was then I heard the dreadful gagging cough behind my head and felt my dreads stir in a furious hot breeze. I spun around and found myself staring at a brilliant blue dragon face, as the beast stood reared upon its hind legs, as tall as ever it could, stretching to reach my meagerly height. Her bright blue tint let me know this was a female, and an angry one. Her black wings pushed against the succulents I had covering the ground near the buildings as a fire retardant, her small yellow eyes were wide with ire, and her fire sack was bulging and bubbling. A scream burst from me as I threw myself to the ground. Chain Five was jerked down as I fell, and I heard the blast of steam that let me know I had caught the other fire and Mel was all right. But the sound was immediately replaced by the roaring fury of dragon flames searing the air around me.

I jerked forward on my hands and knees, gasping for oxygen as the fire sucked it all away, and feeling my back beginning to burn. Then I was at the dragon's side. I scrambled under her wing and rolled onto her blue tail. She let out a furious bleating bellow, and I felt the long tail squirming and slithering under me. A dragon is very sensitive about its tail, and intensely indignant if you touch it. I jerked out my fork, kept in my jacket pocket for just such moments, and jabbed the blue scales under me. A great roar of indignation shook the dragon, and with a mighty flap she lifted into the air, teetering in a slightly ungainly fashion in her exhaustion and anger. The air filled with her exhaled smoke, surrounding me with the dreadful stench. I clapped a hand over my nose and mouth and staggered away from the white cloud. A furry body collided with my foot and knocked me headfirst onto the gravel path winding from the squat farmhouse to the hencoop. A wet tongue found my nose as Mel tried to apologize. I rolled over and sat up with a groan. The smoke dissipated and I saw the last two dragons winging for the forest, evidently finished for the day.

"Well done, Melawnwyn the Mighty," I coughed, laying a hand on my friend's head. His ear slicked back in appreciation of the simple praise and a happy pant flew from between his black lips. I smiled back at him and climbed slowly to my feet, groaning as I felt all the bruises and burns acquired in the morning's work, and considered our next move. I looked down at my farm worker and smiled again at the expectation in his one eye. Melawnwyn had come to me two years ago, battered and half dead, a young starved creature with little left but the breath in his lungs. The right side of his head had been sliced and burnt beyond repair. Though the orange fur grew back to cover most of the

scars, he would forever miss his right ear and see only from one eye. I had never learned his story, and never tried to discover any past owners; nature had its ways, and if Mel had wandered into my keeping I was perfectly happy that he stay there. Now he nudged my knee, his stubby tail wiggling as he looked up at me waiting to hear the word he longed for. I gave it to him.

“Breakfast. You’re right, my boy, I think breakfast first; Charlie’s hungry too. And then we will see about the rest of life. The morning sun only lasts for a scant five hours, let’s get our work done here before the moons show their faces again and we have to deliver goods to old Growler Venderbeer.”

Corinth

The road stretched on with its monotonous brown and unchanging, muddy slither. There was nowhere to set my boot without feeling it squelch deep into the sticky mud. The effort of pulling it back out, and setting it down again, and pulling it out...it seemed to have been going on for years. I had to forcefully remind myself we had only come into this region of bare mud six days ago. My pack dragged on my back and I shifted it to my right shoulder, mentally running through the contents and attempting to think of something I could leave behind to lighten the heavy pull. But everything I owned was in that pack. And I would not willingly part with any of it, not after having carried it so far. The mud pulled at my feet, and my legs ached, and I did not want to think of the next step. So I lifted my eyes from my travel weary feet and turned them on the landscape, trying to find something pleasant. There was nothing. Only the bare, ripped up brown hills where trees had once stood. This place was almost worse than the scorched lands we had crossed to get here. This wasn’t the work of the Rockies²⁹, this was voluntary work of the residents. They might have left a few of the trees standing for travelers to rest their eyes on as they marched over the long roads. But no, there was only the mud and the dull blue of the sky as the sun began its downward climb. The afternoon dark would come in an hour. And the land would look better for it, I thought rather wryly.

Still striving to think of something besides my weary feet, I set my eyes on Father’s broad back as he trudged in front of me. His cloak was muddied, and even the black

²⁹ See ‘Niathalins.’

klackmen³⁰ sheath hanging on his back, usually kept so carefully clean, was splattered with the sticky mud. His shoulders were stooped, and I felt a pang of sorrow for his great heart. He had so longed to find a peaceful place for the two of us to settle, ever since Grammy had died and I had left her care to join him in his travels last year. But I had followed that back across the world by now, and found no place to stop. Through city and outlands, there was no peace for Astor Meagan, or any related to him. My father was too outspokenly Hurfin³¹, and too strong-willed to lay down his knightly service to the king, even though the usurper had ruled for seventeen years now. And I would not have my father any other way. So I told him at Clappton, our last stop, as we furiously repacked our things before the Rockies came for us. I had seen some of the weariness lift from him at my words, and the strength of battle return to his eyes. He had gotten us out, as he always did, and I was glad of it. Yet it was rather hard to be always searching and never able to stop.

The mud pulled and squelched, and I shifted my pack again. Father looked back at me and paused in his even stride. He nodded ahead and I followed his gaze. The land changed there. A wall of enormously high trees blocked out every other sight, long branches sweeping out of their straight trunks, each one draped with thousands of black needles that looked remarkably like a lizard's forked tongue, especially when stirred by the hard breezes of this region. They rose to what looked to be almost a mile

³⁰ This one does require a bit of explanation. This is a slim, useful weapon, a bit like a sword, but unlike any you have ever seen (see glossary if you want more on that). And as it is made of a mix of steel and bonhov, it is very heavy. Do you remember how heavy and shiny the box was when I found it? I discovered later it was made mostly of a metal called bonhov whose main characteristics seem to be shininess, weight, and incredible strength. I tried to scratch the box with a diamond once, simply to satisfy my own curiosity. I tried for three hours, and the box remained as smooth as I found it. (I would have tried longer but Vera, my wife, walked into the room at that point and became indignant that I was using her wedding ring for the task.) The fact that Meagan carries a two-handed klackmen and wields it well speaks of years and years of careful training in both strength and skill; many carried that particular klackmen in *Æselthwēš* history, but in my studies I have found none who used it so well or so easily as Astor Meagan. A remarkable man.

³¹ I know, I am overloading you with footnotes! But after the first few chapters they begin to calm down, as you are introduced to Planistah terms. You need to know this one, so take a moment to read it. At its basic level, a Hurfin is the Planistah term for a Christian. But our word falls somewhat short for a direct translation. For one thing, in our Christianity there was a definite split from the old Jewish ways into the Christian ways, after Jesus came and brought the New Covenant and all that. As a result, Christian can often be seen as being from a certain time period, whereas Hurfin encompasses basically the whole of Planistah history. Also, because of that shift from Jewish to Christian, our Western culture morphed the term Christian to occasionally mean things such as "non-Jewish," or even, "portraying a certain civilized manner." In contrast, Hurfin is a purely religious term, meaning someone who believes the Hurfin's book (Planistah's Scriptures) and professes Christ.

into the sky, and what with the dark color and nasty shape of the needles, I realized it would have been little comfort to the traveler to have any of those left along the roadway.

“We must be getting close,” I said, slinging my water off my back to put our pause to some use.

“Halfful is just along the fringe of those trees,” Father nodded, his calloused hand rising to point. Then I saw a stand of rough wooden buildings, set in more of this sticky mud. At a glance, I guessed there were some two hundred residents in the place, and I knew from the sight of the buildings that not one bathed more than once a week. But it was our last chance at finding a home. And so a home we would make it. I smiled for Father’s benefit, my eyes still on the wooden buildings.

“It will be a welcome change to have growing things near, even if they are a bit dark,” I said. Father’s grim features softened visibly as he looked at me, and he stood a little straighter.

“Yes,” he grunted, and swept his staff up again. “Come Corinth. We will find a home here.”

“Yes, we will,” I stated, and began to follow his back again. The road curved and slithered along, and the mud only grew worse as we got closer to the town. But it was pleasant to think of sleeping with a roof over us tonight instead of wrapped in a cloak trying to keep my hair out of the mud. The effort of pulling my boots up and placing them down in the oozing brown stuff seemed a little less tiring as the hope of gaining a pot of culloo surged through me. The sun sank, and blackness fell over us, so thick I could no longer see my father’s back in front of me. But I could hear his squelching steps and gauged my own by the sound. The yards passed steadily under us, and soon the scent of the stinking mud began to be mixed with the scent of fresh cut wood, smelling rather like a moldy spice cabinet, and much more glorious, the scent of culloo and cooking corlos. It was very faint, but enough that my steps quickened almost unconsciously and I could hear my father’s do the same. The first moon peeked over the northern horizon with her silver sheen, and she was bright enough the enormous trees began to cast a shadow over us.

The dark afternoon noises were broken as I heard other squelching steps move onto the road ahead. Father stopped with a grunt, and I drew up swiftly, one hand silently reaching for the quiver hanging at my waist, pulling four arrows from it to hold ready in my firing hand³². Greet all travelers you might meet, but be prepared to receive a knife-blade in return in these days, or even an ambush of greedy shrimp dealers, as had happened only four months ago. I swung cautiously to the left and looked past the dark blotch of my father. A skinny form carrying a large bag had just moved out of the trees onto the road. He didn't seem to notice us, and strode on with a swinging gate, a whistled song coming from him. It was a kind of half-a-tune, as if he were searching for a song and could not recall all the notes, and for some unexplainable reason the same sort of half-memory stirred me as I heard the strains. Something almost remembered, sweet and gentle, but that I could not grasp. I put it out of my mind, deciding it must be a tune that sounded like many others, and watched cautiously. A long low dog, its head no more than two feet from the ground, was trotting at his heels. It swung our direction and paused, then gave a low growl and bounded off again toward the vague whistler. Father shrugged his pack up higher on his shoulder and strode on, moving a little faster to overtake the stranger. I trotted beside him, slipping my arrows back in their quiver, but shaking my right boot a little to be certain Sticker, my dagger, was ready if I needed him. The dog gave a growl again as we got closer, and the stranger turned to look back. He stopped as he saw us coming. The moonlight was not giving off a strong enough light to see details, and all I could make out was a vague skinny form with its large pack. He was only a few inches taller than me it seemed.

“Pardon mah ‘erald³³,” the stranger said, in a soft voice that stumbled over itself as if he wasn't quite sure he wanted to speak after all. It was heavy with the accent of this

³² Those of you who have made a study of archery might understand that this simple statement by Corinth Meagan sets her apart as an expert archer; only the best have mastered being able to hold arrows in the firing hand while using the weapon. It is a skill which makes them able to fire with extreme rapidity, some as swiftly as three arrows within a single second. I had no such knowledge, it was a friend of mine, Herbert, who explained it to me, while sharply criticizing the recent movie starring Errol Flynn as that pleasant rogue Robin Hood. (I am by no means stating the movie ought to be avoided, on the contrary, I found it quite enjoyable, with a good many entertaining facets. I wish I had a laugh like that Flynn.)

³³ Corinth Meagan renders the Jaspur accent in the texts, and I have tried to match the sounds phonetically to the English words during my translations. I think I might say, all boasting aside, that I have done a fairly spectacular job of it. And I have attempted to make it uniform in the separate accounts of my translations. Those from Jaspur, of course, do not hear the accent at all, having grown up with it. I personally do not think a Boston accent is much different from any other form of English spoken in the States. So those of you who cannot pronounce the name of my town have no excuse for it.

Jaspur Region, a sort of slow rolling thickness that reminded me of the long stretch of mud we had traveled by. “He thinks it ‘is dooty ta warn mah oof...oof anything, actually. And announce mah coming. And tha coming oof anything, even...” His voice withered away into a timid sigh, before he spoke again. “Charlie Biggtahn.”

“Meagan,” my father introduced. The stranger recoiled a step and began to rub one foot nervously against the other at the sound of Father’s rough voice. “My daughter and I are looking for a place to stay here.”

“Uh, that would be Growler Venderbeer’s place. Wahl, she isn’t actually ‘Growler’ that’s what Mel and I call ‘er...wahl, Mel being ah dog, ‘e doesn’t rawlly call ‘er anything...Coomo on, I’m going there.” The stranger swung off again, sidling closer to the trees, and I thought trying to gain a few more feet’s distance from us. He seemed a timid thing, quite unsure of himself. I found myself thinking of the few brown hares we had spotted in this region, intent on their own business, and quick to slide away if they saw you coming, but interested enough to watch you at a safe distance. None of us said anything. The second moon rose in the south as we squelched along, and the light began to be a little better as both their silver sheens spread over the world. But there was still little to be seen of our guide. Not that I bothered trying to see the rabbit-like fellow, I was much more interested in speculating on the brew of culloo a place like this might prepare. We moved steadily closer to Halfful, the town at the bottom of the world, and our last chance at finding a place to settle. Father had said he doubted the Rockies had much interest in this area, as they preferred the more barren lands, and he hoped we would go unnoticed here. But it had been a doubtful statement, and we both knew the rumor. The Rockies were looking for something, and were intent on scouring the globe for it. It would not be long before they reached even the bottom of the world, and such little grungy places as Halfful. For my part, I had small hope of ever going unnoticed with my father’s outspoken ways, but I had no wish to cure him of it.

“We are come to settle, if we may,” Father broke the silence. Our guide jumped rather high at the sudden sound, but he nodded in a sort of vague friendly manner.

“Good,” he murmured. “Tha mud freezes ovah in ah month or so, and makes tha place ah little nicer. Tha people ‘ere...wahl, they are ‘ere. And they don’t particularly mind if you are too, as ah general rule. At least if you leave them be.”

“Missionaries,” Father grunted.

“Oh? Oof what?” he asked, and I was surprised. He either knew nothing of Hurfinity, or more than most of humanity to ask that.

“Jesus’ truth,” Father said.

“Interesting,” the stranger muttered cheerily, and then went on with great hesitation. “You might, uh, not want ta speak oof it too much. They don’t particularly like ‘earing about ideas and...I don’t think they would like yours.”

“They?” I asked. “What of you?” He laughed, a sort of soft choking kind of sound, that was very odd but fairly pleasant.

“Me? Charlie Biggtahn doesn’t think much oof anything,” he answered. “I take mah cue froom nature. She lets everyone be what they will, and allows them tah serve their own purpose.”

“Perhaps you will come on Songday³⁴ to hear of our purpose?” Father asked.

“Per’aps,” Charlie Biggton said waving his hand vaguely at nothing in particular. But I had heard many such answers and knew how to gauge them now. This man would not come. A wooden-plank building loomed up in the dark ahead of us, and as we squelched around it I realized they were much larger than they had seemed from a distance. This square box must be some three stories, and wide enough for three families to live comfortably in each story. I revised my estimate, there were likely closer to a thousand people in this town with the size of their apartment houses. The buildings were placed symmetrically along the muddy streets, one on each side every five yards, and some were larger than the first I had seen. Many had a yellow glow of candle light shining from the chinks in the badly crafted windows, and as we walked well inside Halfful the glow began to supplement the moonlight. I glanced at our guide and was surprised again, not very pleasantly. He was even skinnier than I had first thought, and had long strings of matted hair hanging past his shoulders, looking remarkably like dead, furry snakes. Judging from the color of his bushy, unkempt beard they must once have been the same wheat-like sheen. But now they were a dull brown, and even grey in places.

³⁴ See the glossary under *Æselthwēś* Week.

Not naturally, or dyed either, but simply from dirt and grime. I stepped a little closer to Father and turned my eyes back to the buildings we were passing, forcing myself not to frown too heavily. This Charlie Biggton turned into another street and pointed ahead, smiling vaguely our direction. At least his smile was pleasant enough, and his brown eyes were clear. Though they shifted away from a direct gaze. He was pointing out another of the black plank square buildings down the street. It was dilapidated, recently patched up with new boards, and a sign hung from it that bore the words, "Venderbeer's: the Best Beer, Far and Near." It did not look promising. But I could smell the corlos and culloo I had scented earlier, and did not give up hope. Our guide pulled open the plank door and stepped aside, holding it open for me, smiling rather vaguely at his muddy boots and motioning his orange dog to stay. It was a small gesture, but one that no one but my father had paid me for a full year. I nodded him my thanks as I stepped through, being certain I caught his eye so he saw it. Any who took the effort for such courtesy should know it was appreciated³⁵.

The yellow light of a hotly burning fire struck up at me and drove away the cold stench of the muddy out of doors. I flung my cloak hood back gratefully and stepped down into the large room. It seemed to take up a full half of the building, filled with sturdy but roughly made black-wood tables and benches. A few people looked up as we entered, a pretty barmaid, a bulky man behind the well-stocked bar, a few very large guests at various tables, and one ugly woman in a cap and apron that I took to be the owner with the way she eyed us. All but the barmaid could match my father in height and size, and she was not far behind. It seemed our scrawny guide was not the normal build of those in Halfful. Although he did seem rather normal in his rough, unhandsome,

³⁵ A quick note on the interesting similarity of what is considered polite in *Æselthwēś* and what is considered polite on much of Earth; they are often the same, especially those rules regarding the deportment of men toward women. Holding doors open, assisting a woman to mount, the need of escorts, offering an arm...the list is too long to put here. My only conclusion is that these 'chivalries' developed much as they did here from the studious attempt of a society to conform to the guidelines revealed in the Scriptures. (Vera just looked over my shoulder and added that another reason might be from the simple fact that every woman loves a gentleman.) That is not to say that all civilities are the same, certainly not! For instance, instead of shaking hands, the polite method of meeting a person on Planistah is to close your hand into a fist and bop them upon the right shoulder. If you are particularly glad to see them, you bop them on each shoulder, hard enough that bruises are often created. In fact, there is a song in the midst of the documents dealing almost exclusively with the description of a man's newly bruised shoulders, and drawing happy, exulting conclusions about the meeting of friends after a long separation. The color scheme used to describe the contusions is quite impressive.

and ill-fitting choice of clothing. The big woman's gaze shifted behind us and she nodded.

"Wahl Hairy, I see you made it," she growled.

"Wahl Growler, so I 'ave," Charlie Biggton murmured, moving past us in a timid shuffle. He set a very worn pack on the large bar, and undid the drawstring with a gentleness that was almost a caress. Father began to move deeper into the room toward a table near the fire, and I followed him willingly. "Growler" shoved our guide aside and jerked the bag open. Her large hand slid inside and came out with a potato. She began examining it as I sat down with a contented sigh and slid my booted feet a little closer to the fire. A grizzled old man leaned over and spoke to Father, but it was only an inquiry as to the state of the roads, and Father's inquiry as to the state of the beds here, and I was not much interested. He was a rather deaf fellow in any case, and conversation was frustratingly difficult. Instead I watched the scene at the bar. The large growling woman and the dreadlocked Charlie Biggton seemed the only two people even mildly interesting in the room. All the others held the same surly foolish look and were disposing of their food and drink without much talk. She shook the potato under Charlie Biggton's sharp nose, a frown cut deep into her face.

"Dirty, dirt all ovah it. Mah guests don't take tah dirt on their vegetables, Hairy."

"Dirt?" Biggton said, feigned shock breaking over his face. "Say it is not so! Dirt on ah root vegetable? Howevah did that get there?"

"Joke all you want, but 'ow would it be if I stopped buying your wares?" the woman growled, one eye nearly shutting in a leer that was hideous to see. Charlie Biggton smiled in his vague way and began to empty the sack onto the bar, with the same gentle motion I had noticed earlier. I had the idea he cared more for the vegetables he was leaving behind than any person in the room.

"Where would you find sooch food but from me?" our guide murmured. "I will clean them afore I bring them next time, if you rawlly wish it."

"See you do," the woman growled. She swept past him around the bar and disappeared into the kitchen. Charlie Biggton leaned against the bar and began to whistle vaguely again, but his eyes sought my face. He looked away in confusion as he

noticed that I had noticed him. I turned my attention back to Father. He had managed to get the old man to understand him, and had already learned of a small house set just on the edge of town that might be let to us for a modest enough fee. My heart rose at the thought. Even if it only lasted for a few weeks, it would be very nice to have a house of our own. The woman swept in again, slapped a small coin purse in front of Charlie Biggton and swept on toward us without a glance at her vegetable supplier. She planted herself in front of our table, her large hands on her larger hips, and a frown on her whiskered face.

“Wahl? What do you want ‘ere?” she asked.

“They want ah house ta let,” the old man at the table next to us spoke up. “But I suppose they will settle for one oof your ‘ard beds for tha evening, seeing as ‘ow tha Jaspur mud is out.”

“You shut your mouth,” the woman snapped and then looked back at us.

“A room, if you have one,” Father said, in his deep voice.

“And dinner with culloo, if you have that,” I added. The woman nodded and marched away. Charlie Biggton and his pack were no longer at the bar, I saw after she had moved her bulk. I did not give it much thought. I did not give anything much thought. The pleasant feeling of having arrived after a long journey was settling over me. I was perfectly content simply to sit, with my boots toward the fire, watching the flames dance and feel the warmth seeping into me, and know that supper was coming soon.

CATHERINE GRUBEN SMITH

THE PARABALONI

PARABALONI NOVEL 1



The Parabaloni

Prologue

The freight elevator seemed to drop forever, its hums and groans sounding remarkably like an achy troll to the reporter standing nervously on its metal floor. Jenny Rhen was trembling like a leaf, but it was from excitement, not fear. Or that's what she told herself as she readjusted the stolen black hood covering her head. Jenny had been an investigative reporter for thirty years, and yet this felt like her first real story. She had found a group of hooded murderers working inside America. A strange, nefarious gang had been spotted at two different murder scenes she was working, in two different states. It was like a resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan, or something equally as strange and frightening. They all wore hoods covering their entire face and head, and even called each other by coded names; and this bizarre story was all hers. But right now she didn't have much of a story besides their mysterious headwear. She needed to know what they were doing before she could write it up, and get some proof. Which meant a few risks were necessary. It had taken a lot of guts to steal a hood and follow these crazies underground into what she assumed would be their headquarters, but Jenny Rhen had always had plenty of guts.

The elevator finally drew to a shuddering, jerky stop, and the door slid open. An enormous, domed, white cavity filled the reporter's vision, with a vast silver picture of a healthy oak tree growing out of a dying tree. White plaster spread over the natural Vermont rocks and gave the underground hideaway a surprising modernity. It was as large as a Philadelphian shopping mall, with two levels liberally pocked with doors, four different escalators, and people moving everywhere despite the fact it was ten at night on a weekday. Jenny stepped briskly into the crowd, moving confidently with her notebook in full view. Someone who looked confident and busy was hardly ever noticed, she knew from hard-won experience. Inside, her mind whirled and her stomach flipped in fear. There were hundreds of people down here. All of them wore the black hoods of this strange murderous group, the ends draping elegantly over their shoulders, the almond shaped eyeholes the only thing to show it was a human underneath the black fabric. Jenny had no idea this group was so large. If there were this many of them just down here, there must be thousands of these scary hooded people wandering over America. She thought of how slowly that elevator moved and the single, long concrete hallway it opened to at the top, and suddenly realized she had no real escape route. And judging from the little she did know of these hooded weirdoes, there would be no mercy either. For just a moment she inwardly cursed her editor, Daniel Yates, for setting her on this trail in the first place. Then her eye caught something and her fiery reporter's curiosity burned away her fear.

Jenny Rhen passed a hallway and saw someone in a white lab coat turn a sharp corner five yards from her. He wore a white hood instead of a black one. She spun into the hallway without a second thought, her worn sneakers making hardly a sound as she padded over the tile floor in cautious pursuit of the white figure, and moved on around a sharp corner with the same confident ease that had carried her through the crowded main room. A white-walled hallway stretched on for some thirty feet in front of her, and it was starkly empty. But a smooth metal door rested at her left elbow and a large picture window spanned half the length of the hall. Inside the window was a very large lab, gleaming in its spotlessness. The multitude of metal tables and counters were packed with test tubes, some empty, some filled with a thick red liquid that almost glowed. The white figure moved past the window on the inside of the lab, toward a large silver machine at the back of the room. Jenny squinted, trying to get a closer look. For a wild instant the gadget made her think of the cold morgues she had been in during the course of her career. There was a section with a rounded bottom and a square, thick lid with a shape and size that could fit a small person inside. It was rocking back and forth in a gentle motion, with wires of white, yellow, and red attached at the thick base of the machine. Jenny pursed her lips trying to remember where she had seen something like this before. The lab worker moved toward a touch screen mounted in a blocky fashion on the top left of the silver machine, and Jenny suddenly knew. It was during her story on the flu vaccine; she had gone into the lab where various people were using different tests in their research, and seen one of these immense gadgets. It was a WAVE Bioreactor 200, designed to create a safe place for cultures of viruses to grow. They were making something nasty here.

The lab worker tapped a button with his white gloved hand and the touch screen blinked to life. Jenny stared through her glasses, unconsciously stepping closer to the window as she tried to get the right focus through her gradual lenses, and cursing old age's affect on her vision. Her stolen hood's skinny eyeholes were not helping and she whipped the black fabric off, managing to focus in time to read the words that flicked to life at the top of the screen and see what was in that bioreactor. "Adenovirus Cultures Batch 104" it said, as clear as Richard Harding Davis had described the German's march into Brussels. Jenny stifled an ecstatic squeak as she realized she had confirmed her deepest fear with this group, and gained her reporter's gleeful hope of a world-changing story³⁶. These hooded crazies were making a live virus, a ton of it judging by all the test tubes scattered around, for some nefarious purpose of their own. This was the evidence she needed to write her story.

³⁶ Some argue that Jenny Rhen had already written a world-changing story when she uncovered the gumbo smugglers some eight years ago, but Jenny has always held it only exposed the gang in the mid-west and left the rest of the world unchanged.

Jenny pulled her miniature camera out of her pocket and began to snap pictures. She was ecstatic with her find. But her excitement and the knowledge she was getting the proof she needed distracted her. And her hearing was beginning to go the way of her eyesight, though only her husband admitted it yet, and Jenny was still in denial. She didn't hear the soft sound of footsteps that stopped suddenly at the corner of the hallway, and then pattered swiftly away. She didn't even hear the louder sounds of four pairs of feet treading cat-like toward her. The last sound Jenny Rhen heard was the burst of semi-automatic gunfire that sliced through the still air, ended her career, and left her husband a sorrowing widower. What was left of the reporter tumbled onto the messy tile, as a security guard's booted foot landed on her miniature camera, smashing it into a hundred pieces. A hand grabbed the back of the guard's shirt and heaved him back, slamming him into the wall.

"Idiot, we want to know who she was, and how much she knew!" A tall, sinewy man yelled at the guard. "Everything she carried goes to X. No one can know about us, especially until Operation Weed goes into effect on the 20th. And this spy might have told someone!"

"Understood, J," the guard gulped, nodding his hooded head a little too swiftly. This man was the eminent X's second in command, and a whim from J would mean death. "Nothing must hinder Operation Weed."

"Nothing must hinder our purpose; remember Operation Weed is just a small part of it," J growled. He motioned to the dead Jenny Rhen and snapped his fingers, done with the small talk. The supple J watched dispassionately as the reporter's form was dragged past him, the same sort of bored stare one might give to a moth pinned on a card. It was a sentiment that played out in his life and his plans, and it was one of the main reasons X had chosen this man to be his third arm in his great enterprise. They would need such heartlessness to bring America under their control.



6:21 p.m. Feb. 13; Beans and Books Coffee House, Fairfax VA

Simeon Lee's eyes traveled from his book to his wrist watch as the quiet hum of conversations not meant for him circulated through the rich, coffee-infused air. Someone laughed at a table across the room and Simeon turned his lonely gaze out the window to watch the moon slip into his sight, its silver rays beautifying even the small shopping center's parking lot. His eye landed on a black Nissan Z parked directly across from him, near the curb blocking the way into the slow street. The moon's enchanting light set it off well and he noted it was a very nice car. The convertible top was down and he could see the back of the driver, a brown-haired man sitting in an attitude of waiting. That would be a comfortable spot to wait. It was a pity that back looked so tense. Simeon sighed and stopped avoiding the point with himself.

It looked like the wild-haired young man that had suddenly accosted him on his way out of church Sunday and suggested this Tuesday evening coffee shop visit had stood him up. Oh well, he had accepted the invitation with a flutter of trepidation anyway. Despite the innumerable strange situations he had been in and out of, Simeon Lee still wasn't quite sure what was expected of him at an ordinary friendly visit. And that Mr. Tolliver had worn socks with dusty sandals to church, and was carrying a strange glossy black box under his arm. But even so, Simeon had thought it would be a nice change from his quiet duplex. Now it looked like Mr. Tolliver had decided an old man wasn't worth the effort. Or maybe he had simply forgotten about the distasteful chore he had made for himself on Sunday. He glanced at his watch again to see if he could plausibly convince himself Mr. Tolliver was just late. Twenty minutes... Simeon had only been that late six times³⁷ in his forty-nine years, but he decided he would give this Vincent Tolliver a full half-hour before giving up.

Conversations filled the little room around him. Simeon sat silent, his eyes focused on the words in his little New Testament. The book was open to Romans, but he couldn't make himself comprehend the words. The empty chair across from him kept drawing his attention despite his efforts to ignore it. What would life have been like if someone had been able to fill that chair? He drummed his fingers on the table as he stared at the empty seat, and realized he recognized this mood. He needed someone to talk to. Or even better would be someone who would talk to him. Simeon pulled his flip phone out of his blazer pocket and navigated to the contacts quickly. Out of all the people who had come and gone in his life, there were three he knew would still always welcome him. One lived in the Caucus mountains and wasn't likely to answer his phone. Another was deep in the Mexican interior visiting his relatives and didn't have access to a phone. And

³⁷ Simeon includes the time the greased dolphins and sea anemones hampered his movements in his list of times being late, but I don't agree. He wasn't actually expected at the undersea base and you can't arrive late to somewhere you are not expected.

then there was Saul. Simeon pressed the call button and put the trim black phone to his ear. It rang five times, the slow bell reverberating in his mind and making Simeon wonder if an echo could be mental. An automated message began to speak and Simeon snapped his phone closed without waiting for it to finish. He glanced at his watch, saw the thirty minutes grace period was gone, and stood up to leave. As he slid his New Testament into his pocket, Simeon's eye traveled to the large picture window in a well-formed habit of checking for possible threats before exiting a building.

A blond head whizzed past the window, the shaggy hair whipping around till it looked like some sort of writhing creature trying to eat its owner alive. Simeon watched Vincent Tolliver grab one of the white poles supporting the roof of the shop, winding himself around it to stop. His well-cared-for roller skates didn't fit with the rest of his shabby attire, but he was here. Simeon dropped his New Testament back on the table and moved toward the door as Vincent rushed in, the skates slung over his shoulder clanking against each other noisily. Simeon held out his hand, and the young man started to babble apologies for being late as he took it distractedly. As they strolled toward the counter to order, Simeon gathered he had run into weather that had increased his flight time while flying a freight somewhere. There was something about rabbits and pencils exploding mixed up in the rush of words. He held up a hand to stop the outpour and pointed at the menu.

"House coffee and Reuben," Simeon told the barista. He looked at Vincent Tolliver and raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

"Uh..." the young man started, blinking uncertainly at the menu. "Hey, you have hot chocolate here. One of those. With mint. And vanilla I think. And lots of whipped cream."

"Dinner?" Simeon insisted quietly, careful not to wince at that disgustingly sweet concoction. Vincent stared at the menu for a moment and shrugged. His stomach was doing somersaults and had been ever since he had looked at his watch and realized he was thirty minutes late again. This brother's spotless class and competent silence wasn't helping.

"I don't know. Just something like a sandwich I guess," Vincent told the barista, who was waiting with all the polite patience of the man with a tip jar. Their drinks were shoved at them by a smiling girl, obviously proud of her quick time in getting them together. Simeon glanced at Vincent's wrinkled clothes, shoddy sandals, mode of transportation swinging back and forth on their laces, and paid. He waved away Vincent's objections and led the way back to his table. The two settled in the blocky wooden chairs, sipping their drinks and hoping the other would lead the way.

"You made a flight today?" Simeon broke the silence.

“Yeah, a cargo of tea needed to get to Boston,” Vincent nodded. “I thought that was pretty appropriate considering the history of that town and tea.”

“No Indians at the airport?” Simeon asked, a small smile breaking over his face. Vincent relaxed visibly at the lightened air of his companion. He did have a sense of humor, however slight. Maybe he would survive this meeting after all.

“Thankfully no,” Vincent smiled back. “They would have had to carry it awhile before making it to the harbor, anyway. The turbulence wasn’t too bad, and the fog made it kind of fun because when you can climb into clear air it’s pretty keen. There’s a lot of peace to flying. Have you flown a lot?”

“As a passenger,” Simeon nodded.

“Being a passenger is even more peaceful, I guess. Do you like it?” Vincent asked. Simeon paused before he answered.

“No³⁸.” That conversation fizzled out. Vincent started another one to prevent the awkward silence that was trying to grow.

“So, you said you do something with the government, like most people around here?”

“An aide,” Simeon nodded. “Paperwork mostly, in charge of the first batch through the office.”

“A kind of first aide, huh?” Vincent grinned, and then looked quickly at his hot chocolate as the serious man in front of him still frowned³⁹. “So, do you like the job?”

“Not entirely.” Silence threatened to descend again, and in an attempt to forestall it Simeon expanded on his answer. “But I got too old for my other job. This one fell in my lap.”

“Oh,” answered Vincent a bit awkwardly. Simeon sipped his coffee again and tried to think of something else to say.

“I see your palm pilot in your pocket again. You like electronics?”

“Yeah, I’m also a computer engineer. My dad was a whiz at anything electronic. I guess I inherited some of his skill. Do you like computers or techy gadgets?” Simeon considered

³⁸ He considered explaining that the eleven crashes, sixteen hijackings, and one flying torture room he had undergone had finally managed to give him a near phobia of planes, but decided that might be the wrong note to strike.

³⁹ Simeon got the joke all right, he just didn’t think it was funny.

admitting he had looked on computers as enemies since they had begun to replace his favorite little note books, but chose not to.

“No, not really,” he admitted instead. Silence reigned again.

“Have any family missing you tonight?” Simeon tried.

“No,” Vincent said quickly, dropping his gaze to the brown liquid undulating lazily in his cup. That was an extremely touchy subject, and he didn’t want to go into it right now. Tomorrow would mark a full year since his dad’s accident in the lab had caused a massive explosion, killing both his parents, just a few days after his nineteenth birthday. That was the reason he had been desperate enough to ask a random stranger at church for a coffeehouse visit. This whole year he had existed in a sort of numb sorrow, just getting by from day to day. And he was starting to wake up enough to realize it wasn’t good and he had to do something to drive him out of himself. This little visit was Vincent Tolliver’s first real attempt at the effort, and it had taken a lot of courage to get him through the coffeehouse door. But now that he was here, he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Oh,” Simeon said simply, and that conversation died the gruesome death of the others they had tried to start. This silence was beginning to be oppressive, and was getting more awkward by the second. There had to be some interest they both held! Simeon tried a different question while he attempted to think of something.

“Think you’ll always be a pilot and computer engineer?” he asked. Vincent pondered that one for a moment.

“No, I don’t think so. I want to do more with my life, you know?” The pilot shifted positions as he tried to find the words to voice his half-formed thought. “I know I can glorify God and share His gospel in the jobs I have now, but I keep thinking there must be something else I can do. The world is in such a mess! Every time I hear about another evil law passed, or another bomb planted, I feel so...helpless. Like I ought to be doing something to help.” Vincent paused a bit awkwardly. That probably wasn’t what Mr. Lee had wanted, a bared soul their first real conversation. But far from looking embarrassed or bemused, Simeon Lee nodded seriously.

“Same. I see people whose souls are dead and a world overrun with evil. Then look at the forms I’m filling out and think, ‘futile.’”

“Right,” Vincent agreed. “And as Christians it seems like our doing nothing is worse than if we didn’t know the truth. Here we are on this earth, with a renewed heart and God’s own words and promises. We have a reason to eliminate evil and promote righteousness and justice, and to

help people. I guess I haven't really done much about it yet because I haven't found..." Vincent paused, his lips pursed slightly as he looked for the phrase he wanted.

"Haven't found the right place to jump into the fight?" Simeon suggested.

"Yeah, that's it exactly!" Vincent nodded, his freckled face lighting up with a sunny smile that Simeon Lee noted turned the young man into a very likeable character. "It is a fight, and it's an important one. It seems like Christians nowadays don't think about the fighting aspect at all. Sometimes you have to risk things for the gospel's sake, to reach people. You know, in the early church there was a group of Christians who risked their lives just to help the sick and dying. They ran toward plague victims instead of away from them, and called themselves the Parabaloni, the Gamblers, because they were gambling with their lives to help their fellow men. If there were more Christians like that around today, Christians who were willing to actually get up off the couch and risk some things for others, the world might not be in such an evil state. That's the way to let your light shine, and to be the salt of the earth! Be willing to risk everything for the sake of spreading God's light, and pushing back the evil!"

"You're right," Simeon said simply. The barista interrupted to ask who had which sandwich, and the conversation paused to get the food sorted out. As the coffee shop worker wandered away, Simeon noted with satisfaction that Vincent's sandwich was starting to disappear. Aged fourteen or forty-nine Simeon Lee instinctively wanted to take care of people, and this young man was entirely too skinny. He decided he should allow Mr. Tolliver breathing room to chew, and started up the conversation thread again. "Our Savior risked everything for us. Risking some things for each other is necessary. Risks are a part of life, and taking on the right ones and avoiding the wrong ones ought to be one of a Christian's main concerns. That mindset also allows us to personally help restrain evil."

"You mean in our own lives?" Vincent asked cheerfully.

"Certainly. But also more. Police and FBI put out posters and warnings. If each Christian was willing to help catch criminals, consciously thinking about it as they live, few criminals would get away, and fewer people would be hurt."

"That makes sense," Vincent commented and went back to his sandwich. He had realized he was hungry when his stomach had stopped flipping. This Simeon Lee wasn't scary after all despite how serious he seemed. Simeon took a drink of his coffee and gazed out the window at the parking lot. The moon had moved past his line of sight but the same little Nissan Z was still there. So was its occupant. And he was squirming, as if he were worried. Simeon saw the man in the Z stiffen, and he looked quickly around the parking lot for the reason. A PT Cruiser had just pulled in. It circled around the other cars slowly, making Simeon quietly wonder if it was

checking to see if the area was secure to stop. As the Cruiser drove past their window, Simeon caught a glimpse of the driver. Hawk nose, olive skin, thin, black hair, eye color – Simeon froze in his automatic assessment, his cup halfway to his mouth. Those eyes were deep and dark. And blank. He had looked into many of those kinds of eyes before and recognized the hollow emptiness, it came back to him in some very nasty dreams. This man was an assassin. No one else had that look. The knowledge combined with the idea of wanted posters he had just mentioned to Mr. Tolliver, and Simeon suddenly realized he had seen that face before. He watched as the man placed a pair of sunglasses over his horrible eyes and slid his car smoothly into the empty space next to the Nissan Z.

“So are you going to do anything to change it?” Vincent asked, not noticing his companion’s absorption. “I mean, are you planning on staying as an aide and just seeing what comes up?” The driver of the Cruiser held out his hand to the Nissan’s driver window. A very large amount of cash was held in that olive hand. “I guess there’s not really much choice, is there? I don’t usually run into suicide bombers I have to shoot down when flying, and I guess you don’t usually have militant anarchists you have to tackle.” The Nissan Z driver found whatever he was looking for in his attaché case and handed it to the assassin. It was a very small something to have cost that much cash. “Any ideas on how to incorporate our good ideas into real life?” Vincent tried again, attempting to get some sort of answer from his companion. Simeon Lee turned his face from the window and looked at the young man across from him. Vincent suddenly had the idea he was being sized up.

“Go for a drive,” Simeon answered, a little enigmatically. He slid smoothly out of his chair and looked back at the young man as he slipped his New Testament into his pocket. “Coming?”

“Uh...sure,” Vincent muttered, wondering a little at the sudden turn of their quiet talk. Simeon headed for the door, moving very quickly for someone going for a peaceful excursion. Vincent had to break into a jog to catch up with him. He led the way to a very handsome brown car backed into a space in an unobtrusive corner of the parking lot. The sharp lines and tapered hood that ended in a sort of knife blade style marked it as a car from some twenty years ago, but its sheen and new tires showed it was very well cared for. Its owner pointed a finger at the passenger seat as he settled behind the wheel. Vincent slid in obediently, wondering where they were going. Simeon pulled out so fast it slammed the young man’s door shut for him. Vincent quickly buckled his seat belt and shot a very confused and worried look at the man beside him. Simeon zoomed out of the parking lot, straight across three lines of busy traffic. Horns blared, and the night air was split by brilliant headlight beams seemingly coming at them from every direction. Vincent yelped and grabbed onto the dashboard, as if that would protect him somehow. Simeon’s hand left the stick to push a small red button over his tape player as he settled in the far right lane of the busy road. A whirring sounded and an instrument panel slid out from

underneath the radio. Vincent glimpsed a button marked 'oil spill' and one labeled 'jet pack.' Simeon pressed one that read simply 'tracker.'

"PT Cruiser," the older man told his car. A cement truck pulled into their street, and Simeon whizzed around it, ignoring the red traffic light directly in front of them. Horns blared, and he immediately dodged in between two SUV's to hide his little brown car from obvious sight of the commotion. It wouldn't do to be noticed in their tailing. "White. License, HJK 657." Another whirring noise started up.

"Three lanes to the left, fifty-two yards ahead," an automated voice spoke up from the car's dashboard. Vincent's mouth dropped open.

"What kind of car is this? What are we doing?" he gasped, closing his eyes involuntarily as Simeon sped out from between the SUV's and sent his little car zipping across four lanes again, seemingly without a glance at the lethal hunks of hundreds of pounds of metal moving swiftly all around them.

"A good one. Boss let me keep it when I retired from my last job. We're chasing a terrorist assassin."

"Oh. Right." Vincent swallowed, trying to let his brain catch up. It did. "What? What terrorist? Why are we chasing him? Mr. Lee, what was your last job?!"

"CIA field operative."

"Really?" Vincent gaped. Simeon nodded, his eye on the young man in the seat next to him. He was taking this very well. Much better than most, and Simeon liked him for it. He caught sight of the white Cruiser as it passed under a bright streetlight. Simeon shot across an empty lot to jounce over the curb and back into traffic. They were at a good tailing distance now, and he carefully modified his driving to blend in with the cars around him. All they had to do right now was remain unseen.



8:57 a.m. Monday, Feb. 11; Main St., Philadelphia PA

Jack Leason honked furiously at the black Element that had just cut him off. Stupid people, they had too nice of a car to risk it in maneuvers like that. He pulled his own dinged, silver Taurus up to the curb with an expertise that showed years of practice at driving in the wild Philadelphian

traffic. Jack navigated out of his car, skillfully juggling his coffee, blackberry, and wallet as he dug for his credit card to pay the parking meter. His active mind wasn't on what he was doing. It dwelt on a small, square room high up in the skyscraper beside him, and the single occupant there. Daniel Yates would be tapping his big, ugly desk with his fingers now, waiting to see if the investigative journalist was late for his meeting. Jack smiled grimly as he moved inside. He had done his research on this prospective boss and knew enough to be able to bargain his services well, but it was going to take some real arguing to get a good deal out of Daniel Yates. As he slid into the elevator and punched the button for his floor the reporter's mind wasn't on the silver walls surrounding him, or the slow humming movement carrying him up. It was going over the best methods of handling the man he was headed to meet. Jack stepped out of the elevator on the fourteenth floor and stalked toward the editor's office, his mind racing off onto another track. This had better be a good offer, he needed a real whammy of a story even more than he needed some ready cash. He stopped in front of the secretary's desk and exchanged his ill-humored frown for a businesslike stare⁴⁰.

"Dan Yates sent for me," Jack stated.

"In!" someone barked from the door behind the desk. The secretary sighed and waved a stressed hand in the direction of the door. Jack opened it and saw a small, square room with a large ugly desk, just as he knew he would. Daniel Yates, exceptional editor and king of grumpiness, was drumming his thin fingers on the desk. He was wearing green today, good. According to the latest fired secretary Jack had bought coffee for that meant Dan was in a decent mood. The wiry old man sat and stared, drumming his fingers with annoying rhythmic monotony as the reporter stepped in and kicked the door closed behind him.

"Well?" Jack prompted.

"Not very good manners," Dan Yates said, pulling his feet off the desk to look the young man up and down. "Too handsome. Too young. Drinks too good coffee. Dressed too well."

"What do you want, old goat, a wizened drifter or a really good piece of writing?"

"You did step in right on the dot of nine," Dan Yates mused, a smile curling his lip at the rude reply. "I've read some of your stuff. You don't mind pushing people and you're not afraid to state the truth as you find it. Your writing is too flowery⁴¹. But I guess you'll do. Here's the business:

⁴⁰ Jack Leason had just launched into free-lancing four months ago and hadn't quite decided if a good investigative journalist should wear a hardened scowl, or a knowing smile. After trying both expressions out on various animals at the zoo and getting no response, he stuck to businesslike stares until he made up his mind.

⁴¹ Dan Yate's actual opinion of Jack's writing had been stated earlier that morning to the flustered secretary: "If that fop wrote a piece on hobos needing alarm clocks, the Salvation Army would be buried under the flood of clocks gifted from the public in twenty-four hours."

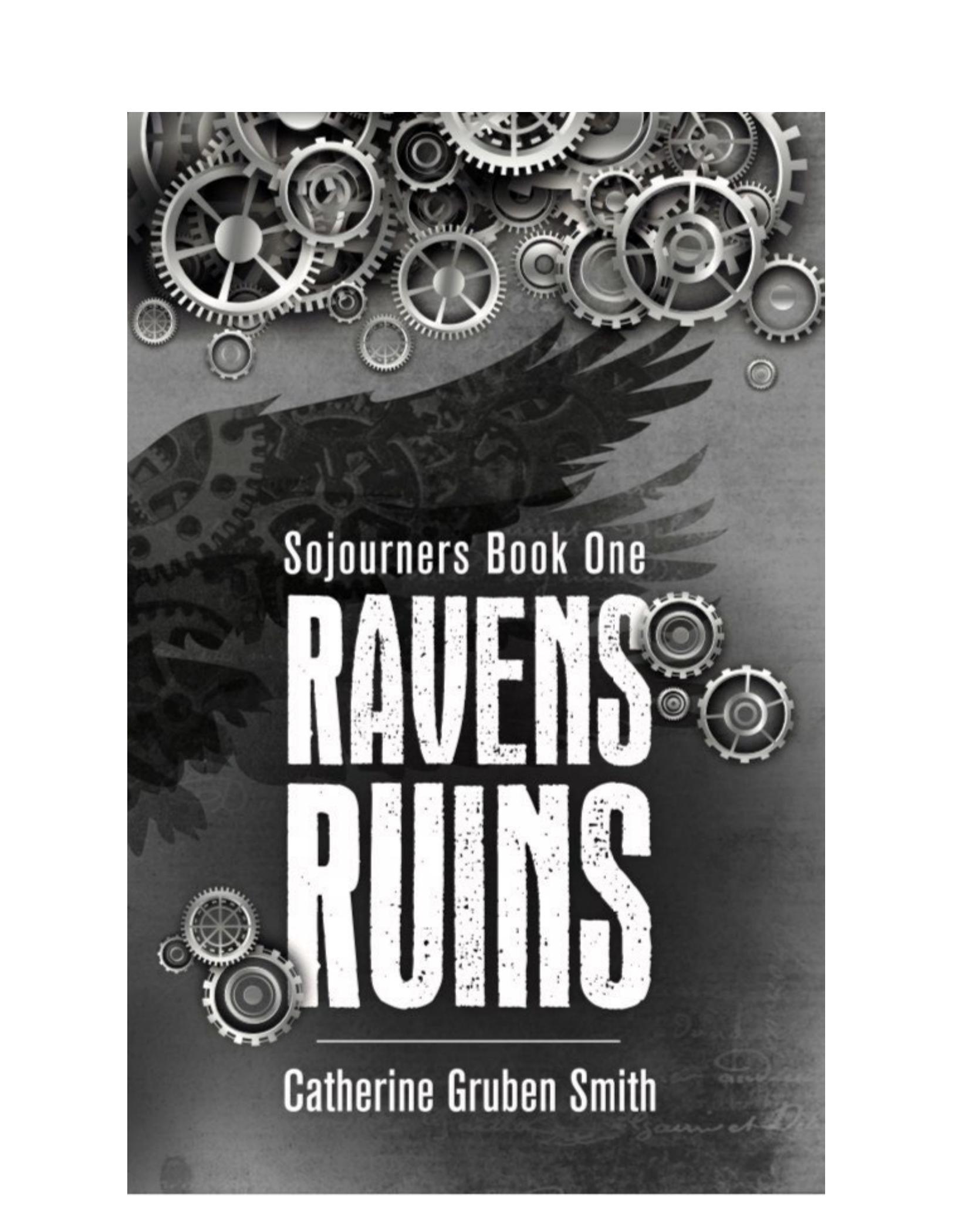
Jenny Rhen, a pal of mine and a really good reporter, was investigating a story connected with the Controlled Parenting here. She's dead now. Find out why."

"If you pay enough," Jack stated flatly. Inside his heart jumped, this sounded promising. He was sorry for whatever character had lost their existence in it but this sounded like good stuff; any story on the CP would bring scores of readers. The conservatives would read it to find out what gory things were going on now, so they could be freshly appalled. The liberals would read it to be certain they knew the current thing to cheer. Jack found himself running through the possible horrible scandals this research might elicit. And if it didn't elicit any, he could always cautiously hint at something he didn't have evidence for. Jack noticed Yates was watching him. He put on his hardened scowl. "So how much?"

"You've got a long way to go before the rest of you matches that scowl, kid," Yates grinned as he pulled a thin file out of his desk drawer. "But I'd rather have an eager pup who can write than a hardened tough who can't. Here's what I know about Jenny Rhen and the story she was working. It's not much to go on, she was keeping this one close, so you'll have to do your own hunting. If it's a good story I'll pay well. If it isn't, I'll still pay something."

"You'll pay well or you will certainly have no story. Let me tell you what my idea of good is..." Thirty heated minutes later the two men came to a temporary agreement, and Jack Leason left the office and headed for his car. He glanced at the file as he walked. His new interest was a *Mrs. Rhen*. Good, a marriage partner was always a fount of knowledge if you could just find what turned on their faucet.





Sojourners Book One

RAVENS RUINS

Catherine Gruben Smith

Sojourners Book 1: Ravens Ruins

Introduction

The doors crashed open. Their bang mixed with the whine of Enoch's priming laser and filled the vaulted room. He spun to face the sound, his heart hammering, one hand grasping the stock of his Brunhiem rifle. Titus's chuckle mingled with the laser's whine and Enoch's shoulders slumped in relief. The Judge, leader of the government for one of the most important kingdoms in the world, strolled over and slapped his guard's shoulder.

"You need to learn how to relax, Enoch."

"Relax!" It was a bark, husky and tight, and Titus lost his smile. Enoch Mickelson wasn't a man to bark at his boss.

"What's wrong, why did you call me here?" Titus asked. Enoch moved aside, allowing a sight of the Pillar of the Book. Usually a huge, tattered, leather-bound book lay on that pedestal. The gold filigree had long ago rubbed off the cover, but the words "Holy Bible" could still be seen indented in scrolled letters. Usually Titus Hillson looked at that pedestal and felt his lungs expand and his tight shoulders loosen, encouraged just to see the book that made his job possible. And not just because it was the basis of the government and the kingdom; the promises and truths, the knowledge of God revealed there, filled his soul with encouragement.

Today, Titus's jaw dropped two inches, his eyes bugged, and his lungs locked. No book lay on the smooth marble.

"Enoch...tell me you removed it for security reasons," Titus whispered, his voice husky. Enoch's mouth opened, his chin trembled, and fear sparked in his eyes. It told his boss all he needed to know.

"My lordship..." Enoch started. He stopped and cleared his throat to get rid of the tremble in his voice and then went on with forced composure. "As Judge, I felt you should be the first to know what we discovered when making our routine checks this morning. Peter Lovine--"

The doors clanged against the walls again and both men spun. A tall, beautiful woman in her forties swept in, with a handsome young man beside her, and a spritely gray-haired man bringing up the rear. The old man paused to close the doors as the others swept toward the pedestal. The woman's hand went to Titus's arm and clutched it as she saw the bare stone.

"Your ladyship, Mr. Daniel, Master Samuel," Enoch nodded at them, his veneer of calm on strong.

"Oh skip the civilities, Mickelson!" the young man burst out and spun to Titus. "What happened, Dad?"

"A robbery, Mr. Daniel," Enoch answered stolidly. "As simple as that."

"Simple?" Daniel growled. "I remember going over the security measures with you, this robbery could not be simple."

“Perhaps so, sir,” Enoch said. “But this is what we found when the guards ran their routine check this morning. Just an empty pedestal. The book is gone.”

Silence prickled in the vaulted room like a live thing. Goosebumps rose on Titus’s arms. The quiet hummed and buzzed in his ears, louder than the clanging door.

“I think,” Samuel said quietly, one hand running through his silver hair, “we had best find a substitute to put on display immediately—”

“Substitute?” Elizabeth broke in, her voice shrill. “There is no substitute for a book, Samuel! There are so few in existence the world over—”

“He knows, my dear,” Titus broke in gently, patting his wife’s arm where it still clung to him, fingers digging into his flesh. “I think he means something that would allow people to think it’s a book. Can you manage it, Enoch?”

“Of course, sir,” the guard nodded. “I will keep Peter Lovine on guard here as he’s the one who found it missing, and gather a series of blank pages and a piece of leather. It will do if we keep people at a distance.”

“For how long?” Daniel Hillson murmured, and again that heavy silence fell.

“We can’t survive as a country without our book,” Titus finally said, his voice thick. “The world hates us already for speaking the truth, if the tiniest hint of this gets out...”

“Disintegration,” Daniel finished it grimly. “I think that diplomatic journey I was leaving for this morning ought to turn into a series of discreet inquiries about who might have taken our Bible.”

“Yes,” Titus nodded, his eyes still fixed on the empty pedestal. He felt a breath rattle into his wife, her fingers loosening with an effort.

“Be very, very discreet, Daniel,” his mother urged, her voice quiet with forced calm. “I know you can be cunning and brilliant when you want to. Be careful.”

“If you think it wise...” Samuel murmured, leaving the words hanging in a way that said he thought it anything but wise. “Remember any inquiry, no matter how cleverly done, is liable to get someone talking. And speaking of talking, may I ask if your lordship means to explain the matter to your two youngest?”

“Good heavens, no!” Titus burst out, and even in that tense moment everyone in the room relaxed in amusement.

“It really is unfair to be so adamant, dear,” Elizabeth commented. “Anna and Nehemiah may be young, and talk a good deal, but they have nearly as much sense as their older brother.”

“Older is correct, when Anna and Nehi are twenty-five I’ll let them in on catastrophes such as this, but not now. Though God protect us from another such danger. May we survive this one by His hand! Daniel, go now while the trail might still be warm. Be very careful whom you talk to.” Daniel nodded, turned to go, and found his mother’s arm through his. He didn’t question it and just strode on as she walked beside him. Marble tiles gave way to squeaking wood as they turned into a little-used servants’ stairway and began to snake toward the ground floor.

“Be careful, Dan,” Elizabeth murmured, her voice muffled by the ancient wood-paneled walls. “We will all miss your grumpiness until you come back.”

“Thanks a lot,” Daniel drawled with a sardonic smile. “I might mention, before I leave you all to your impressive optimism, it’s very well to talk about the twins not knowing, but you know how inquisitive they are. How do you think they’re going to take knowing something is happening, and not knowing what it is?” Daniel said as he held the door and let his mother sweep through into the courtyard ahead of him. Bright sunshine lit up her black hair, and Daniel’s gaze ran over the intricate stonework and high pillars of the front of the Judge’s house as he followed her into the light. He was leaving this place again. As his feet crunched on the hard gravel, a part of him wondered if it would still be here when he came back. A country without a book would be smashed by the rest of the world. If it became known... In his imagination Daniel saw the white pillars wreathed in flames, heard the screams of his family and friends, watched his home crumble.

“The twins are your father’s and my concern, stop worrying.” Elizabeth’s voice cut through his thoughts, bringing comfort and security as only a good mother can. Daniel looked back at her. She stood beside his oval hoverer, waiting for him, with the same steady gaze he had always known. A sudden wave of love nearly made him turn and go back inside. But he didn’t.

“You aren’t really considering giving Nehi a laser for his sixteenth birthday, are you?” Daniel asked, strolling toward his vehicle.

“Only a normal [Brunhiem](#). He’s very good, Enoch says he is the best shot he’s ever seen. Nehi wants a Compton, be glad we have enough sense to say no to that one.”

“A Compton? You know those can cause black holes, right?” Daniel snorted.

“Nehi would look at you with his large eyes at this point in the conversation and say, ‘That’s only theoretical!’ Now Dan, don’t fret over it. You have enough to concern you in this sudden disaster. Do you know how you’re going to start?”

“In my Burbam ’12 naturally,” Daniel nodded, and hopped into the driver’s seat of the smart little hoverer.

“Only two seats, of course,” his mother commented, and Daniel grinned up at her as he pushed the primer and felt the copper coils curled under the oval vehicle begin to heat.

“That way I have just the right excuse to say no to hitchhikers, and have the quiet to use that brilliant brain of mine.” Daniel broke off as the hoverer gave a soft beep to show it was ready. He pushed the pump down slowly, relishing the feel of the smooth metal under his fingers. Elizabeth Hillson leaned over and kissed her eldest son on the top of his head, ignoring his annoyed squirm, and stepped back. The steam began to pour from the coil’s jets, and the hoverer rose six inches. One quick wave, and Daniel Hillson whooshed off, his mind whirling with what needed done. His mother stood still in the courtyard for another minute, murmuring quiet prayers. Her face was drawn as she turned and began to walk slowly back inside. It was probably a blessing one of her children was out of the country; at least he might survive when the world found out Sojourner’s Kingdom had lost their book.



Chapter One: Confusion

"Make haste, O God, to deliver me; make haste to help me, O Lord." Psalm 70:1

A hard, round boot smashed into Paul's middle, driving him over the tiles. His breath choked and pain lanced through him. No reason for it, Paul's mind supplied in a detached way as his body curled and uncurled on itself; pain just for the fun of it. A hand gripped his ankles and dragged him across cold tiles. How long had these men had him? It could have been two days or two hours since he had been drugged and kidnapped. He couldn't tell. They hadn't even asked him a question, not through any of it. A groan tried to escape, but it took too much effort to get out as he scraped along. His mind began to numb. It was a relief and he gratefully let his consciousness dim. The sound of hinges creaking and wood scraping over tiles filtered through the heavy sack pulled over his head. Paul wished the bag didn't smell so strongly of fish. A hand grabbed a shock of his sandy hair through the bag and yanked him to his knees. Simmons started speaking again. Paul winced as the voice cut through the air, his throat constricting in panic. When that man was near, bad things happened.

"Here he is, boss, as requested. We made sure he was in the mood to listen to you before we brought him."



The shaggy grass muffled every step, making it easy for Anna to move silently through the forest. A smile played over her face as she crept along, watching her twin. He had no idea she was coming. Nehemiah sat hunched over his notes, studying for their political history class, engrossed in the ideas as always; which opened up a hundred wonderful possibilities for his sister. A soft chuckle slid from Anna as she noticed where he had chosen to study. A greater flowered tillandsia stretched over him, some of its twisted green shoots winding through the air to grip two tall pine trees. Its bulbous body, forty other twisting limbs, and its single seven-foot flat pink flower, created a perfect pool of shade. It was a good choice as far as comfort went. But a deep cavity resided in the top of the flowered tillandsia, right where the pink bloom sprouted, and it had rained yesterday.

Anna gathered the leather skirts of her dress about her legs, connected its hidden zipper to create a pantsuit, and shimmied up the nearest tree. She leapt the gap between her oak and the pine just on Nehemiah's left and paused. He sat hunched over his notes and hadn't even glanced up. Her nose wrinkled in a frown. This was almost too easy. Oh well. Anna wrapped her hands around the air plant's tangled shoots, where they held it in place six feet in the air, and twisted the shoots violently. The tillandsia flew upside down, and two gallons of flower-scented water cascaded from its bulbous inside.

A roar broke from Nehemiah as he staggered to his feet, cold water (reeking of pinkness) pouring down in a waterfall on his head. His black curls plastered over his eyes and he didn't

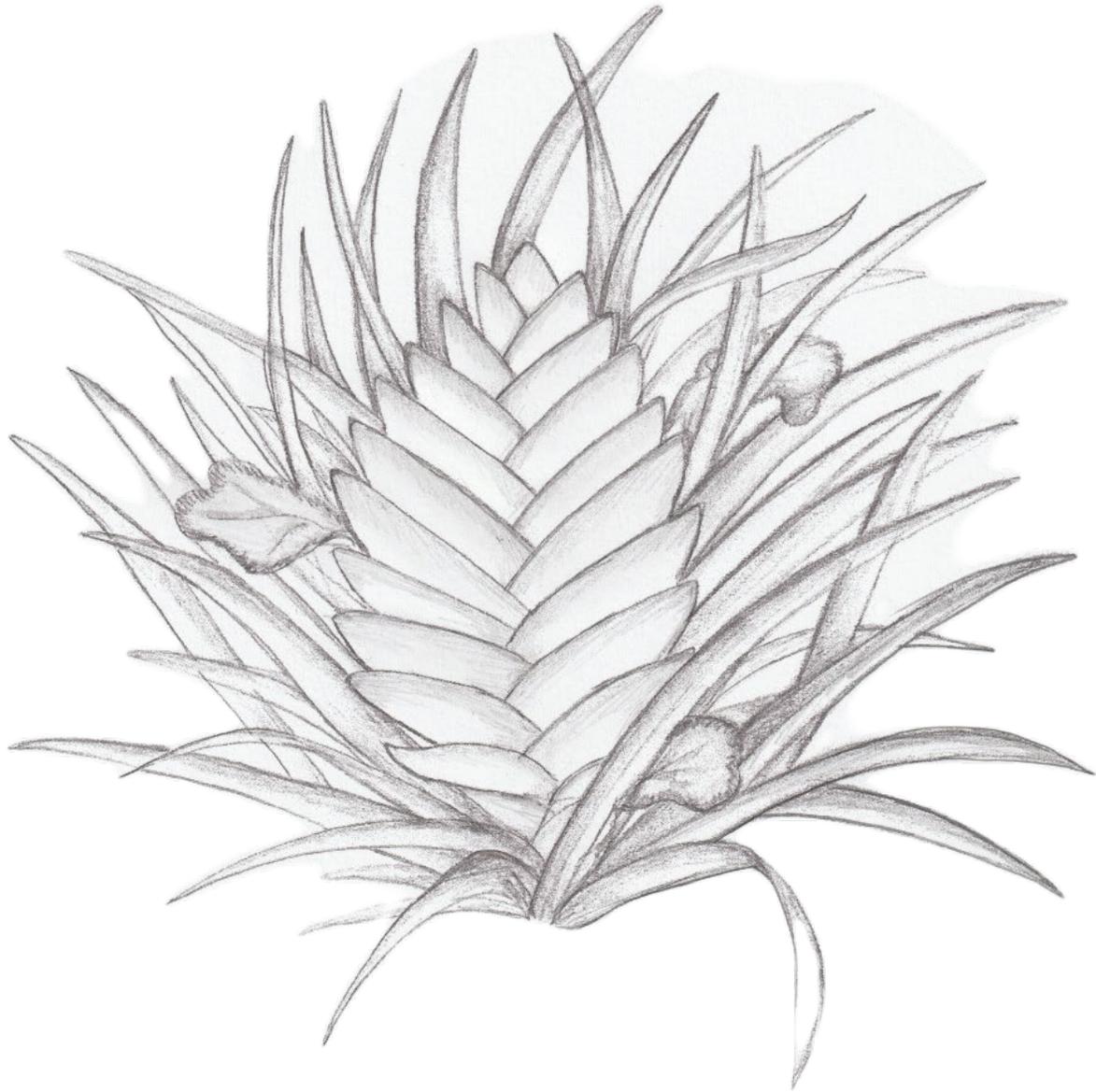
see his sister drop out of the tree. But he heard her laughter as she sped away. Nehemiah dashed the water and hair out of his eyes and took off after the sound, his boots pounding with the pent up energy of a morning spent studying. Anna heard him coming and veered into the woods, still giggling. But Nehemiah saw the move, guessed where she headed, and took a different path.

Anna dashed past tall pines and sighing aspens. No undergrowth caught at her feet, the foresters did their work well and the Sojourners' woods were cleared and thinned. A glimpse of the road showed through the woods, and Anna quickened her pace. Daniel should be driving down that road at any moment. He had been gone for seven months, with hardly any hologram calls even except hurried, hushed conferences with her father. Seven months without his grumpy presence to tease and enjoy. Today if her plan worked, she could lead Nehemiah here and get Daniel to see how wonderful he smelled this morning. She topped a rolling hill and the road stretched before her, a line of smoother green trailing through the well-tended forest land. Daniel's little hoverer sped along it, the steam jets leaving a wet trail on the grass. Anna picked up her pace, a happy yell starting up in her throat.

A slim band snaked around her ankle, tightening with a jerk. Anna sprawled forward, damp grass ramming into her forehead. The grip tightened. Her joint popped, and a gasp slid from her as she rolled to her stomach and looked behind her. A cold stone of fear dropped into Anna's stomach. A creeper held her ankle. A bulbous black body lolled four feet away, its fifty dark green vines snaking out in every direction. But they were turning toward her. Feeling their way across the grass, blind tendrils tapping, curling, uncurling, slipping over the ground. A second coil shot around her boot. The grip tightened again and Anna yelped as her bones scrunched against each other. She kicked out instinctively. But fear crawled up her throat, tightening her airways. Once a creeper picked something to hold nothing would make it let go, and there was no human strong enough to break its grip. Another strand of vine leapt forward, snaking around her waist, one found a flailing arm, and the rest of the vines began to creep their way forward. Anna gasped out a yell, knowing she was going to be too crushed in about a minute to even scream for help. Squeezed to death by a plant in her own forest! More vines felt their way toward her as Anna kicked and yelled, heart hammering and throat dry. Six more twined themselves around her middle and her ribs groaned, her breath choked out of her.

The first wave of real panic swept through her.





A greater flowered tillandsia

“Now, now, Simmons,” a new voice, mild and friendly, broke into Paul’s panic. The tone hit Paul and confused him enough his mind began to numb. “Curb your roughness. He might be a follower of the Sojourner’s way, but he is still a fellow human. Take that bag off his head, for heaven’s sake. Do you want him to suffocate?” Paul involuntarily shrank back as a hand fumbled at his neck for the cord tying on the bag. The gritty fishiness jerked off and the bright light of an afternoon sun cut into his eyes. It took a moment for his vision to adjust, and a bit longer for his throbbing brain to process what he saw. He knelt on a large porch in a beautiful garden. Green grass rolled into the distance, rising and falling in soft hills, covered in shaped bushes and sprouting flowers. Paul’s eye followed the scenery. It was so peaceful. He began to count the bubbling fountains.

Hard knuckles caught him on the cheekbone and he sprawled onto the concrete.

“The boss is talking to you, Christian,” the harsh voice of Simmons cut through his spinning mind. “You had better listen.”

“Yes, well, I think we can do without that. Help him into a chair and then leave us for a while,” the friendly voice said, with a hint of disapproval. Simmons jerked Paul from the ground and plunked him in a chair. A very comfortable leather chair, part of him recognized, hovering on the edge of consciousness. He forced his mind to focus on the man sitting across from him. The stranger positively beamed at him. He was fat. He sat there smiling at Paul as if the analyst was there for tea instead of fighting to stay conscious in his chair.

“As I was saying,” he beamed, “we are not members of the Kingdom of Autonomous Man, your country. If we were we would be duty bound to turn you over to Science as a deterrent to the furtherance of mankind. It is so very foolish to be a Christian, you know. But to each his own, I say. If you want to believe in that God, I say go ahead, by all means! I am a citizen of the world, Paul, and I think men should live as brothers. All I wish is for a quiet life the way I want to live it. Unfortunately, for the kind of a life I like to lead, I need money. A great deal of money.” The man paused. Paul got the feeling he was supposed to say something. He had the wild urge to recommend a dieting plan and forced down a hysterical giggle.

“If you’re looking for a ransom I’m afraid my family couldn’t afford anything you would call a great deal of money,” Paul rasped, each word like sandpaper dragged through his throat.

“No, no, nothing that crude, my dear fellow, I’m on to a good thing already. I’m only looking for a little information from you, Paul.” The leather chair under the man squeaked as he leaned forward and began to rub his chubby, red hands together. “I want to know about the Judges. Just tell me what you know about them.”

“The Judges?” said Paul, his confusion mounting. Was he maybe in some kind of feverish nightmare? It seemed almost as disconnected as a dream.

“Yes. Not to do them any harm, you understand, it’s just that they have something I’m looking for.”

“Aren’t the Judges part of the state in the Sojourner’s Kingdom?” Paul murmured. He sorted through his aching brain. “Sort of...the oil that keep the state moving smoothly...or something.” The smile began to fade from the man’s face. Annoyance flitted over him as he leaned back in his chair.

“Yes, Paul, that’s who I mean. You are deep in the workings of the International Discipleship Program–”

“You know about the IDP?” Paul gaped.

“Oh, I know a good deal, you would do well to remember it. IDP; a silly name for the Christian underground. For such a well-connected batch of Christians you really should have a better name. Whoever organized you was a genius, you know that, don’t you? There are very few groups who manage to stretch through more than one kingdom, your IDP ought to be proud of their achievement. But I really don’t care about that. The point is, being so deep in the dealings of Christ’s own you should know something of what I’m looking for in the [Sojourner’s Kingdom](#). Tell me about the Judges.”



The soft whine of a priming laser cut through Anna’s fear. She squirmed her dress’ hood over her eyes. A lining of woven lead lay between the soft black leather and the felt of her hood, a shield for any accidental laser rebounds. The hood slid over her long black curls, and the world went dark. The crushing grip suddenly released, dropping limp. Anna slumped on the ground, gasping, filling her bruised lungs, and wondering if her anklebones were as broken as they felt. She groaned as she sat up, shoving her hood off. A tendril of white steam lifted off the bulbous black center of the creeper; now just a pile of smoking ash.

“Anna, you idiot, what did you do that for?” Nehemiah’s voice cut through her gasps, and Anna chuckled breathlessly. “Tipping a plant over on me, ruining my notes, and then nearly getting squeezed to death by a creeper!”

“You can’t be too mad at me, you killed the plant just to keep me alive,” she gasped.

“That wasn’t for you,” Nehemiah said haughtily. “I didn’t want Daniel’s homecoming ruined by your playing about with horticulture, and Mom and Dad would insist on crying over your dead body.” His assumed superiority melted into a laugh as he squatted beside his sister. “Ann, you have no idea how funny your hair looks right now! I love shooting lasers near you.” Anna grinned as her hand went to her hair and she felt it standing up a foot over her head with the static. Then she gave a dramatic sniff and clasped her hands in front of her in assumed delight.

“Oh, what is that delicious smell in the air? I do love the perfume you’ve been using.”

“Okay, okay, you don’t have to gloat,” Nehemiah grinned, flicking his wet hair out of his eyes. Anna grabbed his arm and levered herself to her feet. A tall form burst through the trees and two thick arms shot around her and lifted. A yelp flew from her as the arms squeezed her bruised ribs. Daniel Hillson plopped his sister on her feet abruptly and rounded on his little brother.

“Put that thing away Nehi, what are you two doing out in the woods playing with lasers!” Daniel almost yelled. An annoyed pout played over Nehemiah’s face. But he slapped the Brunhiem back into its holster. An optical fiber laser with a relatively small battery, the Brunhiem was one of the few lasers compact enough to carry comfortably holstered at the waist. Nehemiah rarely ventured outside without his.

“Don’t call me that! And Mom and Dad let me use a laser, so what are you griping about?” Nehemiah grumped.

“The fact I just watched my sister nearly get killed by a plant and then incinerated, that’s what!” Daniel spluttered. Anna’s bright laughter cut through the clearing.

“You have no idea how much trouble Nehemiah and I get into when no one’s watching!” she laughed. Anna stood on tiptoes and planted a fond kiss on her older brother’s cheek, then spun back toward the road, her hand wrapped around his wrist, dragging him along as her swift talk filled the air. Daniel found his flustered worry dissipating. Anna had grown even more beautiful in the few months he had been gone, even with her hair standing on end. What a peace-making charmer! Nehemiah began to add to the chatter and Daniel found a smile creeping over his face as he heard the way his voice cracked and dove into deeper tones. They piled into the hoverer, and Daniel sat blinking in the minuscule passenger seat, wondering how his fifteen-year-old sister had managed to talk him into letting her drive. The vehicle whooshed along the road at a furious pace and Nehi chattered as he perched on the back and pretended it was a seat. Some things didn’t change at least, they still talked as much as they always did. Anna jerked the hoverer to a stop so suddenly the steam cut off. The vehicle dropped onto the ground with a metallic bang. A nut jiggled off and rolled down a hill.

“Apparently that isn’t how you stop,” Anna commented brightly, ignoring Daniel’s groan. “You must teach me how it’s supposed to stop soon, but now look where I brought you and admit this is a better road to take to get home!” Daniel looked up from where he was studying the side of his hoverer trying to find where the nut had come from. He grudgingly admitted she was right.

The forest dipped sharply, he could see over the tops of the pines and birches and twisted tillandsias, nearly a hundred miles into the country. A network of roads divided farms, copses of woods, and a host of small towns. Off in the distance stood larger towns, their spires and chimneys mingling with more treetops and spiraling shoots of vast hanging tillandsias, with no overcrowding or pushing. A delightful mix of colors; green trees, yellow wheat, white cotton, red brick, blue lakes. Everything peaceful and lovely and orderly. Like an immense, beautiful beehive set in the midst of a rainbow.

And it would all go up in flames if the wrong person learned of their stolen book. Daniel’s eyes sought the town closest to them, studying his home. The majestic house dominated the town, set a little ways from the other buildings, and shaded by an impressive oak. If you could call the Corinthian-style building a house. The seat of the Judges, wielders of the sword of justice and protectors of the kingdom. A bit melodramatic, but it was their title. The town stretching around the house looked sprawling and innocent. But Daniel knew where the buried laser-shields lay, and the guards with their scanning systems and weapons. As they watched on the top of the hill, someone would be watching them, someone from the Judge’s special guard, the best of the nation’s renowned army. If the wrong people tried to approach, they would be spotted fifty miles out and annihilated. Anna waved and pointed to Daniel. She lifted his hand and waved it back and forth, explaining they probably knew who was on

watch, and they ought to be sociable. Nehemiah glanced back at his brother. A dark unease crawled over Daniel's face.

"What's wrong?" he asked. The scowl quickly changed to a smile and Daniel ruffled Nehemiah's hair as he hopped out of the hoverer.

"Nothing, Nehi. Not a thing."

"Don't call me that!" Nehemiah sputtered, pulling away and smoothing his wet hair.

"What? You didn't used to mind. Especially when it fit you and you were about this high," Daniel commented, sticking his hand down by his knee and laughing.

"Oh, don't mind him," Anna said as she followed Daniel down the hill, leaving the half-wrecked hoverer on the road. "Nehemiah is determined everyone's going to treat him with his 'proper dignity.'"

"I suppose you like it when people call you a dear girl and pat you on the head?" said Nehemiah, a blush darkening his olive cheeks as he trotted after his siblings.

"Actually, it usually makes me smile and wonder if I really am a dear girl," Anna laughed. "Come on you two, Mom and Dad want to see Daniel. Dad put off five different appointments tonight in order to spend it with you, and Mom's been worrying you wouldn't get here in time and her chicken and beans would burn."

"We had better hurry then," Daniel said, quickening his pace.

"Not that way!" the twins yelled.

"The river cuts the path in two and you don't see it till you're in the middle of it," Nehemiah explained.

"You mean *you* don't. I saw it first!" Anna giggled. "Come on, Daniel, this way." She dashed off and the two boys followed more slowly.

"I've missed you," Nehemiah said suddenly. "I wish you hadn't stayed away so long."

"I know. But there were things that had to get done," answered Daniel.

"Well, you're back now." An excited grin lit up the boy's face as he looked up at his brother. "Now you can show me that trout fishing hole you've kept hidden so well, and teach me the best ways to get a catch! Dad hates fishing, almost as much as Anna does."

"I know," Daniel said. "All right, it's a deal. The moment I get the time, I'll show you my secrets and let you talk my ear off all day. But what is that smell? Are you...are you wearing perfume?" Nehemiah scowled and ducked his head, but a guffaw from Anna cut off any explanation.

"It's a new habit, doesn't he smell simply divine? But don't let him tell you about it now, it will take too long," Anna called and looked back, hopping on one foot impatiently. "Come on you two, are you going to let a member of the weaker sex beat you back home?" Nehemiah and Daniel let themselves be taunted, breaking into a run, trailing their laughing sister.



"The Judges? The same family's been elected for over a hundred years, I think," Paul mumbled. "The... Hillsons, that's their name. I seem to remember the children are named after prophets... Sir, I come from KAM, Sojourner's Way isn't my country and I don't even

remember the Judge's first name." Annoyance flickered over the other man's face; Paul read his future there. He let his gaze drift out to the peaceful garden and prayed for the strength to endure it, surprised that he felt more weariness than agonizing fear. His wife's face rose in his mind; then the fear began to invade. Paul's breath quickened, his lungs constricting as the desperate, begging prayers for a miracle babbled in his brain. He wasn't ready for heaven, not when Mary and the children still needed him!

"Very well," the fat man said, "if you won't speak, I'm afraid I'm going to have to let Simmons have you again. He has a little house where he likes to take people." The man sighed. A petulant frown cut across his features. "I wish you would tell me, Paul. You seem a nice sort, and I hate to see cruelty done to any creature. Even a follower of the Way. But no matter." The man flicked a hand his direction. The hot bag shoved over Paul's head again and fishy, close darkness and his own rasping breaths speeding in panic filled his world. The string jerked tight around his throat and Paul gagged. A hand closed over his arm, levering him to his feet and shoving him back inside. Paul wondered for the hundredth time what was going on. Why he was here? The Judges? He didn't know anything about them. Mary, now that name he knew. A sob broke from Paul as he thought of how frantic his wife must be now. And Thomas and little Hannah. What would they think of their father who never came back? Oh Lord, grant a miracle, get him home! The hand on his arm shoved, his weak knees buckled, and Paul slammed into the marble tiles. Rough rope shoved over his ankles and drew tight, and tighter, till it cut into his skin. The biting, bruising fingers clamped over his arm again and jerked him to his feet. An arm slid around his waist, and a shudder ran through him as the grip tightened; he was utterly helpless.

A sharp hiss invaded the air, like a vacuum sucking in through a hole too small for it. The sound started in front of Paul, but it whipped through the air till it enclosed him, and brought a sensation of whirling, pulsating wildness with it. The air circulated at a crazed rate all around him, traveling in a circle, and the hiss was swallowed by the sound of the wind current. Darkness spread around him. It wasn't a light being flipped off, and he wasn't pulled into a dark room, it felt like a blanket drawn over the whirling air, a deep black blanket that brought freezing temperatures instead of warmth. Paul stood shivering uncontrollably, his body heat sucked from him as the frozen air whirled and spun and buffeted him. It got into his cuts and burns and made each one feel like a live beast eating its way deeper inside him. A scream ripped through his raw throat. His mind spun out of focus. It wasn't an ordinary loss of consciousness, it was something new with the whirling darkness around him, a sense of weightlessness and spinning.

Hard ground smashed into his feet. Paul sprawled on his back, his captor's grip no match for the force of that fall. Or landing. Or whatever it was. The hissing moved to a higher, more desperate pitch. Then it stopped, it all stopped. Quiet fell, leaving only a hint of the debilitating cold behind. The blackness peeled away, and Paul could feel dim light around him. A calloused pair of hands gripped his bound ankles and dragged him by his legs. It was a different ground. Cold, rough, bumpy, and hard. Bricks. Old, crumbly bricks, that's what the ground felt like as he scraped along it. The air felt different. The light was certainly different.

He could tell it was darker here, even through the heavy material. And it was cold. It seemed as if he had changed climates as much as buildings.

"I'm worried, Simmons," a voice spoke up from by Paul's feet.

"Shut up," Simmons ordered.

"You know what I'm worried about?" the voice said. He was either very stupid or very brave to ignore a man like Simmons. "The black raider, that's what."

"I said shut up," Simmons warned.

"He's showed up every time we've tried this before, it's like he has a sixth sense when we've got a member of the Way here. And every time he shows up it means more trouble for us." Paul's legs dropped onto the cold ground and the voice gave a horrible gagging shriek.

"I told you to shut up," Simmons growled. "I want to forget that black raider, got it?"

"Then don't turn around," a deep voice spoke from near Paul's head. Silence fell on the scene. Paul lay hurting, nearly blind and suffocating. But he could feel the tenseness of that silence. It tingled. And then it burst in a sea of action as Paul lay helpless. He heard the soft whine of lasers priming and firing, and the softer thumps of fists pounding. Feet shuffled around him, over him, and into him. A boot rammed into his side, and he rolled across the rough bricks and slammed against a wall. The sounds went on, people thumping and scuffling and crashing. A distant loud bang drifted through the noise, and a thick curse poisoned the air.

Silence fell. No sound moved outside of the fishy sack. His own blood pulsing in his ear and his painful wheezes were all he could hear. Paul felt his pounding heart creeping into his throat and choking him. Fear had gripped him before, but this silence was maddening!

Something touched his throat.

A rough cry broke from Paul and he pulled away. The thing followed him, and Paul recognized it; a hand, untying the bag. The suffocating string fell away, and the sack gently slid off his head. A black form bent over him. Swathed in soft black leather, Paul could see nothing of the person, they could have been short or tall, man or woman. But two dark eyes shone out of the black leather wrapped around the head of the person, and a deep, twinkling smile crinkled those eyes as they looked into Paul's. They were alone, Paul and the stranger. Paul's heartbeat hammered and he felt a whimper smothering in his throat.

The stranger held up a folk-art, metal cross, dangling on a silver chain. Relief washed through Paul in a wave of nauseous dizziness. That design meant this figure was a brother in Christ, a member of the IDP, the Christian underground. He was being rescued. Oh thank God, he was being rescued! Paul's stomach roiled and he felt sick. The figure put a black gloved finger to his lips to check Paul's relieved babble, the cross disappeared somewhere in his clothing, and he pulled out a knife. The stranger knew how to use the blade, and in an instant Paul's wrist cuffs were off, his feet and arms were free. The figure in black raised him carefully to his feet. Paul slumped, his mind spinning, and every joint and bone and muscle cringing and shrieking at the effort of moving. But the black figure apparently expected his reaction, hefted Paul's arm over his shoulders, and began to walk. The dark eyes met Paul's, and they crinkled in that encouraging smile again. It gave Paul the heart to move, and he

found his feet. Partially anyway, he still stumbled along like his daughter at ten months old. He had the urge to start spitting out baby language, and fought the hysteria back down.

They moved along steadily. Where and why Paul had no idea, and didn't try to guess. Why ruin the consistency of such a bizarre, confusing day? To keep his mind off the agony of moving, Paul looked around him as he stumbled along. It was a dark hallway, crumbling with age. Red bricks started at the floor and arched over his head. Paul stopped to look at the bricks closer to try and decide how old they were (and to rest his aching, aching body). Old, very old, almost certainly from before the fall of the last civilizations. The black-clad figure pulled him forward. The long, strange hallway stretched on, and Paul just kept moving, turning corners, stumbling along like a child, leaning on his unknown ally.

Part of the dark hall morphed into another black form. Paul jerked back with a gasping murmur, wondering how many other bizarre things could happen to him today. This other form was bigger than the first, but otherwise they seemed identical. The new figure exchanged burdens with the first stranger, taking Paul's weight and handing over something wrapped in black cloth. The first form faded into the shadows. Paul continued down the hallway helped by his new ally, deciding he didn't even want to ask what it was about. They turned two more corners and stopped, faced by an iron gate. Paul stood leaning heavily against the big figure in black, glad of the rest. But the thought of Simmons somewhere behind them wasn't exactly restful. His skin started to crawl. Paul looked up at his ally, gasping out a question.

"What...what now?"

The figure didn't turn his head, but spoke in a deep, strange voice.

"Wait."

Paul licked his dry, broken lips to try again. A huge roar, of sudden flames and power, rent through the hall and shoved into Paul with a searing heat; an explosion, outside their radius of sight. The bricks trembled, three crashed from the roof, spraying red dust as they smashed into the floor. Paul gasped and clutched at his strange ally as his feet shook out from under him. The iron gate swung open and the dark figure moved Paul swiftly into the deeper darkness through the gate. Another arm reached out and encircled Paul's waist as they passed through. The first black clad figure was with them again. The little group moved swiftly, the two in black almost carrying Paul.

A splotch of pale white sunlight spilled around a brick corner. The first stranger, the one with the nice dark eyes, put a gloved finger to his lips again and slipped ahead out of sight. The others stood still, waiting in the hallway. A long minute ticked by. Paul's senses began to cloud over and his experiences began to merge into a jumbled series of images and sounds. A black gloved hand shot around the corner and a finger crooked in a beckoning movement. Paul's feet scraped over bricks as the stranger carried him forward. As they turned the corner, the first black figure hopped beside him and slid a pair of copper goggles over Paul's eyes, and the world turned blue as he looked out through the dyed lenses. The soft whine of lasers priming came from his two allies. The burly arm around his waist tightened, then their feet began to pound, and they dashed across the uneven bricks. They shot out of the hallway into the sunlit outdoors.

Fire crackled. Men and women ran everywhere, their ugly military-grade clothing dull in the light. Some of them stopped and shifted lasers at him as he was raced through the sunlight. A part of Paul knew he should be afraid. The deadly whine of lasers came from his two black allies and the people fell over. A large Belton hoverer, that's what they were headed for, already hissing, its sleek bronze oval gently rocking back and forth as the steam jets forced it off the ground. The bigger black figure dropped Paul into the hoverer's backseat, and leapt into the front of the vehicle. A black gloved hand landed on Paul's shoulder and shoved him to the floor. He felt the slight up-and-down rock of a hoverer in motion, and the delicious heat of the steam pouring out of the copper coils under the vehicle. The heat seeped into him and he lay still, trying to decide if he was awake or not as the sounds of shouting and crackling and laser-fire mixed with the sensation of moving. It was decided for him. Paul lay unaware of the last frantic moments of his escape from Simmons' little house.



ⁱ Forster, John. *The Life of Charles Dickens*. New York, NY: Sterling House Publishing Co. 2011. P. 373